

FRODO IS GREA...WHO IS THAT?!?: THE
PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION OF
AN ONLINE CELEBRITY PARODY

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Abstract

My thesis analyses the phenomenon of Figwit, a non-speaking elf extra who appeared for only three-seconds in the first instalment of Peter Jackson's 2001 *Lord of the Rings* movie trilogy. Figwit was initially generated as an online parody by female fans of the movie and as a foil to the 'swooning, drooling girly' fandom that was being directed towards the movie's star actors. However, Figwit evolved into a bona fide, albeit minor, celebrity both on and offline as he attracted attention from worldwide media, a small speaking role in the final movie and genuine adulatory fandom as manifested in the production of Figwit merchandise.

In my thesis I argue that Figwit's creation and consequential community formation reflects a dynamic online-offline dialogic in which pre-existing offline and habitus-generated social practices and distinctions, ideal reflexive individuality and celebrity/fandom were dynamically reproduced within online technological frameworks. I also argue that online activity and interactivity is generated by users to strategically express and engage intensified reflexive individuality, affirming sociability and hyper-social distinctions.

In this regard I have also argued that these various potentials and imaginaries were significantly enabled by digital architectures and genres of online communication and interactivity. In particular, I discuss the internet's capacity for searchability, traceability, and rhetorical framing processes that facilitate continuous re-editing authorship possibilities, which are not necessarily replicable in face-to-face interactions.

Finally, I argue that reflexive online interactivity and identity expressions may transform into online and offline consequences that may be constructive, divergent or even contradictory.

The arguments put forward in this thesis are based on a multi-sited ethnography, which utilises a variety of methodologies including participant-observation, subject interviews, communications and media archiving and analysis, and it draws from a variety of sources both online and offline.

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CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

In the autumn of 2002 I distinctly recall receiving an email that contained a link to a *Lord of The Rings* fan website. The link led me to what could only be described as a completely ‘cheesy’ and rather ‘cringe worthy’ homage to an elf who was a minor extra in the first instalment of Peter Jackson’s fantasy movie trilogy based on J.R.R. Tolkien’s novel *The Lord of the Rings*. Upon closer inspection I realised that the actor playing the elf extra named FIGWIT, an acronym for “Frodo is grea...Who is THAT?!?” (www.figwitlives.net), was actually a friend of mine and a Wellington actor/comedian/musician called Bret McKenzie.

Moving forward a few years, I was sitting in an editing room watching uncut footage for a documentary about Figwit called “*Frodo is great... who is that?!?*” that was being produced by friends of Bret McKenzie, still wondering why someone would bother to create a website for an elf who was onscreen for less than 3 seconds. Were the women responsible for the creation of Figwit stereotypical ‘geeky’ fans who are commonly associated with *Lord of the Rings*, *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* fandom? It was difficult for me to fathom how anyone could find a bit-part movie extra worthy of this level of adulation. However, watching some of the documentary footage I immediately knew that my anthropological curiosity had been activated: I had to know why these women appeared obsessed over their self-made celebrity? I wondered if the creation of Figwit would have been possible without the internet¹, and it also occurred to me that the women’s adulation of J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* (LOTR) could be an important element. It was clear to me that the internet and people’s offline interests were entangled influences in the creation of a celebrity movie extra. However, it was not until I decided to research Figwit that I realised that I had not understood the women’s joke.

¹ Other online researchers capitalise the Internet as a proper noun. As the internet is an increasingly common medium, like the television, telephone and book, I identify it in a similar manner.

At its heart Figwit was an in-joke amongst a group of women who were casual fans of the LOTR novel and who participated in online TheOneRing.net (TORn) discussions. More remarkable is that their online parody or “little joke” (Erica Challis, TORn co-founder, *Frodo is Great...Who is that?!!*, 2004) turned into a phenomenon that attracted worldwide media attention. In my thesis I explore how online interactivity facilitated the creation of a celebrity elf parody based on a less-than-three second movie appearance. Specifically I examine this phenomenon to understand the active dialogic between offline socio-cultural processes and online technologies and interactivity. Furthermore, I explore some of the new possibilities and imaginings that online technologies and interactivity can generate as evidenced by the creation of Figwit.



The Lord of the Rings – the novel

J.R.R. Tolkien's fantasy novel, *The Lord of the Rings* is commonly recognised as the archetype for fantasy fiction sagas. Tolkien's work is often perceived as significantly responsible for a generation of (mostly) 'spotty boys' and men wielding polyhedral dice battling one another in role playing games (RPGs) such as *Dungeons and Dragons* and more recently in online multiplayer games like *World of Warcraft*. LOTR has also been cited as an inspiration to many progressive rock bands, most famously *Led Zeppelin* and *Styx*, the 1960s hippy/flower-child movements (Thompson 2007: 5) and the science fiction genre (Shefrin 2004).

Tolkien's LOTR is a classic fantasy epic of good versus evil, where elves, dwarves, wizards and walking trees use all manner of mythical magic and ancient armoury to battle for their respective sides. Originally published as three volumes totalling over 1200 pages, Tolkien's trilogy also comprises of extensive and detailed appendices, in which comprehensive information

about the fictional languages and various genealogies of elves and others are presented. Essentially, Tolkien's LOTR is regarded by many as a complete fictional world in which readers can fully immerse themselves.

Plot synopsis

The three books, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (FOTR), *The Two Towers* (TTT), and *The Return of the King* (ROTK) trace the journey of one golden ring created by the Dark Lord Sauron, who imbues it with powers to control the free races of Hobbits, Men, Elves and Dwarves that live in Middle Earth. In order to be free from the evil powers of Sauron, the inhabitants of Middle Earth must permanently destroy the 'One Ring' in the fires of Mount Doom, which is located deep in Sauron's realm of Mordor, without succumbing to the temptation of the ring's powers.

The first instalment of the trilogy, FOTR essentially focuses on Frodo, a hobbit who is bequeathed the One Ring by his uncle, Bilbo, and his journey as the reluctant ring bearer who must embark on a perilous journey to the fires of Mount Doom in Mordor. The title of the first book and movie refers to the formation of a fellowship that accompanies Frodo on the journey to Mordor. The company comprises of Legolas the elf, dwarf Gimli, Boromir of Gondor, and Aragorn, who all pledge their different abilities, powers and weapons in support of Frodo's quest. Also accompanying Frodo are his hobbit friends, Pippin and Merry, and loyal gardener, Sam. Finally, bringing the company to nine members, the Fellowship is guided by wizard Gandalf the Grey. Traversing Middle Earth to avoid Sauron's evil, all-seeing eye, which is attracted to the One Ring Frodo is carrying, the Fellowship narrowly escape many threats, such as blizzards and enemy creatures, namely Orcs, Uruk-hai, Ringwraiths and other gory, angry beings. Even in moments of respite, where the Fellowship take refuge with allies, ever-present danger is near to Frodo, especially when many peripheral and core characters reveal to Frodo their weakness to the ring's power. The first book ends with the Fellowship splitting up on account of Boromir trying to wrest the One Ring from Frodo, who subsequently flees from the group and, feeling the weight of responsibility as

ring bearer, tries to reach Mordor alone. However Sam interrupts his escape and he too joins Frodo on the journey to Mordor. Meanwhile, an attacking party of Orcs kidnap the two other hobbits. In ROTK, the final book and movie, Frodo eventually arrives at Mordor and destroys the One Ring by casting it into the fires of Mount Doom. After this Frodo leaves Middle Earth, wounded in body and spirit, and possibly dying due to his prolonged contact with the ring, and he departs for the Undying Lands to find peace.

Adaptations of the novel

In 1956, Tolkien's work was adapted into a 13-part BBC radio play and in 1979 a US radio play was made. Recordings of both no longer exist, but in 1981 the BBC created another series of 26 half-hour episodes.

However, prior to Peter Jackson's movie blockbusters, one famous 1978 adaptation by Ralph Bakshi, was the first combination real action and animation in the history of cinema. Bakshi's adaptation of *The Fellowship of The Ring* and part of *The Two Towers* was released as *The Lord of The Rings Part 1*. Many Tolkien fans were upset that Bakshi had collapsed FOTR and TTT into one movie. Despite respectable box office takings, the cinema studio United Artists saw the venture as a flop. No further film versions were planned until it was announced in 1998 that another American studio, New Line Cinema and New Zealand director Peter Jackson were to produce three movies that mirrored Tolkien's trilogy (*Wingnut Films announces Lord of the Ring* 1998).

Peter Jackson's movie trilogy

In December 2001, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Peter Jackson's greatly anticipated first instalment of his cinema adaptation of Tolkien's fantasy novel, arrived in movie theatres. Throughout film production Jackson's project was widely perceived as one of the most ambitious and riskiest in recent cinema history. Jackson was at this time a low-profile director, who was not based in Hollywood, but who had secured US\$270 million from New

Line Cinema to concurrently shoot three films in a faraway location of New Zealand with a core ensemble cast of nine, including the well-known British actor Sir Ian McKellen who played Gandalf and American actor Elijah Wood who played Frodo. Since previous cinema adaptations of LOTR had not been successful, many eyes were on Jackson, particularly the approximately 100 million loyal Tolkien fans (Shefrin 2004: 265).

New Line Cinema and Peter Jackson's production introduced elements of Hollywood and movie fandom to a story that, up until then already had a loyal and substantial fan following based around the LOTR novel. By introducing actors to characterise Tolkien's already much-loved and admired characters, the films drew upon a potent, yet potentially critical, mix of fandom based in film and literature. Actors cast for the key roles not only aesthetically encompassed aspects of Tolkien's vision, but some such as Orlando Bloom who played Legolas, Viggo Mortensen who played Aragorn and Liv Tyler who played Arwen also clearly reproduced the 'beauty' aesthetic dictated by Hollywood sensibilities. In this respect Jackson's adaptation made Tolkien's story accessible to those who would not read a 1000+ paged novel, but who would happily spend three and a half hours in their local multiplex cinema watching each instalment.

Apart from the large-scale production logistics New Line Cinema and Jackson, the critical attention of Tolkien purists and fans was an additional challenge to their project (Shefrin 2004: 265):

They [the fans] were also extremely protective of the book, in part through having been burned once by the 1978 Ralph Bakshi version. A significant number of them also had websites and were ready to pounce. (Thompson 2007: 55)

Shortly after the announcement of Jackson's and New Line Cinema's venture a bevy of discussion groups, analysis, news and commentary sprung up online through existing and recently formed Tolkien fan-generated websites. Some online outlets were created during pre-production of Jackson's project, one such website was TORn (www.theonering.net).

The One Ring.Net

TORn began as a fansite “forged for fans, by fans of J.R.R. Tolkien” (*About TORn* n.d.). Created in 1999 by two Tolkien fans, one from New Zealand and the other Canadian, who were interested in following Peter Jackson’s adaptation, TORn is one of the most comprehensive and popular online LOTR-related sites. During pre production and when filming commenced, TORn reported exclusive stories and scoops including cast and crew interviews; fan news and fan gatherings; and links to worldwide media coverage of the film. Apart from the official movie site www.lordoftherings.net, TORn was the most up-to-date and informative site for people to access news regarding the Jackson production, registering tens of thousands of ‘hits’ per day.

In its 800 webpages of content, TORn is a comprehensive site that caters for all things LOTR-related. The website comprises of sections that host in-depth discussions and articles about the source material (Tolkien’s novel), online shopping for Tolkien or LOTR-related merchandise, a dedicated movie section including a scrapbook collection of over 1600 pictures, articles and photos related to Jackson’s movies, and in-depth character and cast information. TORn also consists of a gaming section dedicated to discussions, reviews and information about trading card games; online, board, role-playing, PC or console games. The site also includes a fan section where fans can display their own, or source, other fans’ wallpapers², art, writing, comics, and music inspired by LOTR. TORn also prominently displays a link to the official Peter Jackson fan club, The Bastards Have Landed (www.tbhl.net). While most of the site is administrated by a team of over 30 people, the site is also designed to have its membership actively contributing to different sections by simply using the message boards³ or posting relevant photos or

² Wallpaper is the term used to describe the image backgrounds displayed on computer monitors.

³ Message boards are components of websites where individuals post communications to each other and where online discussion forums emerge.

newspaper articles. With a membership possibly somewhere in the hundreds of thousands or millions, TORn serviced a diverse LOTR network that ranges from people who simply want up-to-date information about the movie through to those who write about the etymology of the Elvish language.

After the success of Jackson's first movie, TORn experienced a steep growth in the number of visitors to their website. Most users I have spoken to refer to the website as a friendly, accepting place, albeit daunting for novices who are not yet expert Tolkien enthusiasts or experienced TORnadoes (TORn-speak for regular members).

Legolas is not great – the online creation of Figwit

The first online mention of Figwit according to his creators Iris Hadad⁴, a then-university student from Israel and Sherry de Andres from Somerset England, was in January 2002 when Iris replied to Sherry's posting on TORn about the Council of Elrond scene in the FOTR movie.

The Council of Elrond scene is one of the most pivotal scenes in the first volume of Tolkien's story and is where the fellowship of the ring is created. In the novel the scene unfolds over 32 pages and is one the longest chapters in the first volume of the novel. Furthermore, it was acknowledged by the movie-makers to be the most difficult to adapt for screen (Barrie M. Osbourne, *Frodo is great... who is that?!!* 2004). It is in this climatic scene that the dark-haired elf extra, then only known as Elf Extra #2, makes his less than three second appearance.

Before the Council of Elrond the Half-Elven Lord Elrond calls a meeting with various representatives of Middle Earth's races to decide the fate of the One Ring. The scene climaxes when the gathering of men, elves, dwarves, hobbits and a wizard argue who should take the One Ring to Mordor. In the midst of movie depiction of the fracas, Frodo announces "I will take the ring the

⁴ I obtained permission from all my informants to disclose their real names in my research.

Mordor, though I do not know the way”. At this point the movie cuts to the council attendees’ reaction, as the camera pans to capture their surprise at Frodo’s pledge, on the far right of the shot, for less than three seconds stands Elf Extra #2, who later became F.I.G.W.I.T. (acronym for Frodo Is Grea...Who Is That??!, hereafter Figwit).



Fig.1. Still frame image of the movie scene in which Figwit appears on the far right (Courtesy of www.figwitlives.net)

Figwit lives online

The online discussion between Iris, Sherry, and other TORn posters concerning the dark-haired Elf Extra #2 quickly escalated and within days the extra was named Figwit. The women were motivated to create Figwit as a parody of the genuine adulatory female fan discussions on TORn concerning main character actors such as Orlando Bloom and Viggo Mortensen. The Figwit parody thus focused on mainstream celebrity attributes such as the elf’s physical beauty and aesthetic appeal, the ‘obvious’ talents of the actor playing Figwit and so on (see Chapter Three). A fortnight later, due to the popularity of their parody in-joke, the women had written an FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) on TORn about their gorgeous elf. This addressed issues about Figwit’s ‘vital statistics’ (e.g. age, height etc), notable qualities (e.g. brooding, pouting etc), aesthetic appeal (e.g. youthful, tall, handsome etc) and faux biographical details about his role in the Tolkien epic.

Shortly after, Iris and Sherry were joined online by two TORn posters from United States of America, Jen Gillette and Tanya Armstrong all of whom contributed to the subsequent development of the independent FigwitLives website (www.figwitlives.net), which was launched within two months of Iris' initial TORn posting.

The online creation of Figwit was notable in that the women took aspects of his unremarkable screen performance and presented them as Figwit's defining characteristics. For example, the fact he did not speak, or barely feature in the foreground of the movie's scene fulfilled the fantasy of a tall, dark, brooding, handsome male actor stereotype that Iris, Sherry and their online friends cultivated in earnest – and in parody.

Figwit lives offline

On 12 April 2002, FigwitLives first appeared on the TORn headlines that feature on the site's homepage⁵. Consequently, the FigwitLives website was inundated with web-traffic and emails. The website crashed due to being unable to handle the volume of online traffic. During this period Figwit's creators received many emails revealing the identity of the Figwit actor as Bret McKenzie, an actor/comedian/musician from Wellington. This overwhelming response further motivated the women to maintain an active FigwitLives website and to find out more information about McKenzie, who they referred to as the "the elvish impersonator" (*Gorgeous Elvish impersonator spotted....Figwit is gre...who is THAT? 2002*).

Consequently, the creation Figwit and the revelation of McKenzie's identity was reported by a number of media outlets, including the *Daily Telegraph*, *USA Today* and *The Guardian*. After the initial TORn report, the FigwitLives website attracted significant online attention from outside the TORn network. Furthermore, New Line Cinema responded to the attention that Figwit was

⁵ A homepage is the first or front page of any online website.

receiving by casting the character in a short speaking role in the final movie ROTK.

As the women gathered more information about McKenzie, they were alerted to his impending appearance at the annual Edinburgh Fringe Festival as part of the New Zealand comedy duo Flight of the Conchords. In June, 2002, the core Figwit team, who variously resided in Israel, United States of America, Germany and England, made a decision to meet each other and Bret offline at the Edinburgh festival.

In late July 2002 prior to McKenzie's departure to Edinburgh, Bret's girlfriend, Hannah Clarke and two other friends, Stan Alley and Nick Booth, decided to make a documentary film about Figwit. Incidentally, the film was greatly aided by all three movie makers having worked on Jackson's production, their access onto LOTR film sets, and the ease by which they could arrange interviews with cast and crew. As members of the LOTR production crew they also found it comparatively easy to obtain permission to use LOTR movie footage. Stan Alley, the documentary's principal director, funded himself to accompany Flight of the Conchords to Edinburgh to film Bret's meeting with the Figwit creators. The documentary film was released at the Wellington Film Festival in New Zealand in 2004.

Figwit now

Shortly after the Edinburgh gathering Sherry ended her involvement with FigwitLives, and consequently started a Flight of the Conchords fan website (www.whatthefolk.net). Iris continued with the FigwitLives website, although this has waned considerably since McKenzie was invited to perform a speaking elf role in the final instalment of Jackson's trilogy. His appearance as Arwen's elf escort in the ROTK was a few seconds longer than his debut.

Today, Figwit boasts his own Wikipedia entry (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Figwit), returns over 80 000 search hits on Google, and features on his own LOTR

trading cards that are available online and through offline hobby, models and games shops.



Fig.2. Decipher trading card of Bret McKenzie/Figwit as 'Aegnor' the elf escort in ROTK.

Theorising online interactivity

Samuel Wilson and Leighton Peterson (2002: 460) note “that anthropology’s interest in Internet-based social and communicative practices is relatively new, and a coherent anthropological focus or approach has yet to emerge.”(2002: 450) In this section I trace the development of online research and argue that online interactivity should be regarded as a continuum and dynamic hybrid of offline socio-cultural processes. In this respect online interactivity may conservatively reproduce offline influences, including Tolkien and movie fandom, sexualised female gaze, ideal reflexive individuality, social distinctions such as middle-class, gendered and other dispositions. Online technologies also have capacity to make visible and facilitate opportunities for textual and intensified identity, community and hyper-social distinction practices.

Undoubtedly the internet and the World Wide Web have dramatically altered aspects of communication and social interactivity, particularly people’s

notions and practices of information dissemination and acquisition, and their individual and group identity formations.

Wilson and Peterson define the internet as:

[The] physical global infrastructure as well as the uses to which the Internet as infrastructure is put, including World Wide Web, email, and online multiperson interactive spaces such as chatrooms. (2002: 452)

This definition is useful to my ethnographic analysis as the creation and consumption of Figwit seamlessly and coherently developed across these varied internet fields (e.g. online discussion boards, chatrooms⁶ etc). This definition also encompasses the broad and varied findings of online research of the last decade and a half (see below).

Early scholarship (Wilson & Peterson 2002) about the internet primarily concentrated on the virtuality of online technologies, and its potentially radical social and cultural implications through online gaming, newsgroups, multi user domains (MUDs) and related technologies, such as MOO (multi user domains object oriented) and ‘massively multiplayer online role-playing games’ (MMORPG, e.g. *World of Warcraft*). Focussing on the programmatic/textual aspects of online interaction, early internet studies cast cyberspace as something other than real, and debate around internet practices typically centred upon the utopian, democratising possibilities or its conversely anomic potential to dismantle existing societal structures. Fundamentally, these research interests considered internet-mediated interaction and identity formation as separate from existing social and cultural practices, and predicted that online interactivity could drastically alter existing offline practices.

⁶ Chatrooms facilitate ‘real time’ conversations so that individuals need to be online to participate, while discussion boards do not necessarily involve ‘real time’ communication and are typically organised around specific areas of interest.

However, early empirical approaches to internet research challenged these naïve predictions and found that online practices were in fact bound by existing social and cultural structures. Arturo Escobar (1994) argued that early internet discourse neglected a "background of understanding" (1994: 214) to view cyberculture as a "technology of modernity"⁷ (ibid) and therefore overlooked the attendant social and cultural conditions of modernity. Although empirical studies of the internet still recognised that the techno-social environment provided new/different opportunities, Escobar contended that internet research needed to consider the stratified, rational, scientific, economic, geographic and technological realities of online users' experiences and access (217). For instance, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argued that people who lack the knowledge or "do not subscribe to the dominant ideologies of language and technology" (cited in Wilson and Peterson 2002: 460) comparatively lacked access to, or proficiency in online communication as opposed to those who possess the requisite educational, social and cultural capitals.

Scott Lash argued and identified that internet-mediated communication is strikingly middle class (1994: 167). Despite being a small percentage of the world population, the middle classes comparatively have better access to the internet due to their offline educational, vocational and financial capitals. For example, G8 countries - home to just 15% of the world's population – account for almost 50% of the world's total internet users (World Telecommunication Indicators Database, 2004). New Zealand internet access also reflects similar disparity, 2001 census data found that households with higher incomes and formal qualifications were far more likely to have internet access (Statistics

⁷Mindful that post-modernists may take issue with Escobar's notion, or that the internet may indeed have emerged out of high modernity, arguments over the post-modern nature of the internet are outside the scope of this thesis. Though such debates are not irrelevant to internet-related discourse, my use of Escobar's assertion is to situate the internet within its materiality and preferences for particular symbolic and material activities. Escobar contends "whether our era is postmodern or modified modern ('late', 'meta-', or 'hyper-', as some have proposed) is a question that cannot be answered prior to investigation of the present status of science and technology." (1994: 213)

NZ 2004: 9-14) than lower income households - a trend I believe to be present in most highly-industrialised countries.

Computer usage rates are highest among industrialised Western nations – Netherlands, Canada, Great Britain and United States respectively (*Truly a world wide web: Globe going digital*, 2006). Substantial disparities in worldwide access - 53.8% of internet users are in the developed world compared with 13.8% of the developing world (World Telecommunication Indicators Database 2004) - and overall low rates of participation, clearly illustrate that the new possibilities derived from online interactivity structurally favour the post-industrial middle classes and other social elites.

Wilson and Peterson (2002) noted that within the last decade a growing body of ethnographic work has situated internet-mediated communication and online interaction as *cultural* (also Baym 2002; Constable 2003; Escobar 1994; Hine 2000; Marcus 1996; Miller and Slater 2000). This research has begun to examine how gender, geographic location, class and race are contextualised and constructed in online activity (Escobar 1994: 217; Wilson and Peterson 2002: 452). While Wilson and Peterson (2002) recognised that the internet is a fairly recent area of research in anthropology there appears to be some consensus in ethnographic studies which have found that online users are significantly informed or motivated by their offline contexts (Baym, Escobar, Hine, Miller and Slater).

In fact, the separation of offline and online obscures the highly dynamic dialogic that exists across and influences *both* fields of action, and as studies of online interactivity show, the offline and online are mutually constitutive in a variety of complex ways. However, it is useful to retain the distinction between offline and online as a heuristic device, so as to clarify how online technical frameworks influence and shape the socio-cultural practices of online users and similarly understand the influence of users' offline social and cultural worlds. Indeed I have analysed the online-offline dialogic of Figwit's creation and consequential community formation as a threefold process,

examining how offline social practices are dynamically introduced into online technological frameworks, and then how interactivity occurs amongst online social networks. In addition I examine the potentials and imaginings made possible by online technologies and genres of communications. Finally, I assess how online interactivity influences and/or manifests in users' offline contexts. Through this approach I explain how online interactivity is a dialogic process that has offline-online continuities, dynamics and new potentialities.

Wilson and Peterson argued that online activity and interactivity has generated an “emergence of new sorts of communities and communicative practices” (2002: 449). Others have proposed that online research should focus on these emergent social processes by “recognizing the complex ways in which people are engaged in processes of making and interpreting media works *in relation to their cultural, social and historical circumstances.*” (Ginsburg, cited in Wilson and Peterson 2002: 455 emphasis added). Examining new online practices as dynamically reproductive, rather than replications, of offline social and cultural processes may also elucidate ways in which computer mediated communication (CMC) is also coherently and somewhat seamlessly incorporated and hybridised into users’ lives – both online and offline.

Daniel Miller and Don Slater's ethnography of internet users in Trinidad emphasises the "embeddedness" (2000: 8) of the technology, arguing that an online context is situated within the offline world of Trinidadians. Miller and Slater concluded that offline notions of their "Trini-ness" (2000: 6) or ethnicity were an integral component of Trinidadian online interactivity and their study demonstrated how groups of online individuals engaged, replicated and reconstructed existing shared (offline) understandings of ethnicity through their online performances. Furthermore, Miller and Slater argue that an anthropological analysis of the online must address continuities with other social spaces and interactivities, especially those that occur within mundane settings and relationships that online users “may transform but that

they cannot escape.”(2000: 5) While the influence of offline socio-cultural processes of Figwit’s producers are an essential component of my analysis, more sophisticated studies (boyd 2007; Hine 2000; Wilson & Peterson) of the internet have demonstrated that the online interactivity also evokes greater complexities such as hyper-social distinction practices (see Chapter 4).

Christine Hine, like other researchers (see Baym 2000; Miller and Slater 2000) also noted that people’s online interactions are related to and informed by their offline interests, but concluded that online personas are “strategic performances” (2000: 144) of offline subjectivities. Hine observed that this was, in part, due to the socially sanctioned and technologically structured, yet generative, ways that the internet is used (2000: 151). For example, individuals are able to establish and dynamically maintain their own websites to directly reflect and readily disseminate their personal opinions and perspectives. Moreover, online individuals are able to readily communicate with similarly orientated others and to exclude or absence ‘dissenting’ voices from their internet interactivities. Therefore the internet’s technological frameworks indelibly shape online interactivity, which is a dynamic and processional hybrid of online technical conditions and offline social and cultural processes.

Thus online interactivity and internet-mediated subjectivity are influenced by the online technology medium itself, which enables particular avenues and flows of communications and interactivity that privilege particular narratives and subject-orientations where “the technology itself is an agent of configuration; it will have certain 'preferred readings' or built-in uses – in hardware terms, but also via manuals and the user interface which instructs users.” (Mackay et al. 2000: 751) So there are new possibilities for online sociality and identity narratives, although these engagements are enabled and constrained by the materiality of the technology.

danah boyd's⁸ work, which examines teenagers' interactions on myspace⁹ (www.myspace.com), concluded that the internet has irrevocably changed the scale, dissemination potentials and persistence of their online identity and community formations (2007: 141). boyd recognised that the built-in properties of online technology, such as its "persistence, searchability, exact copyability, and invisible audiences" (2007: 128) magnified and idealised aspects of social interaction and subjectivity in ways which were not possible through offline social engagements (ibid). However, she also found that teenagers used the technologies to practice and reproduce existing "peer-based sociality" (2007: 121), such as "hang[ing] out with friends and classmates" (ibid).

Like boyd, Nancy Baym's (2000) study of online television soap fans also concluded that online identity constructions were consistent with their offline contexts, and convincingly dispelled the notion that the internet was a "virtual" (2000: 202) reality where people were free to create fictional versions of themselves. Baym also examined how online community maintenance practices resembled similar offline strategies and found that "online worlds develop affective dimensions and experiences, and these feelings, situated in the bodies of group members, do not distinguish between *virtual* and *real*." (2000: 205 emphasis in original).

Indeed the production and consumption of Figwit demonstrates how offline notions of ideal reflexive individualism (Howland 2007)¹⁰, an outcome of the institutionalisation of individuality in post-industrial society (Beck 2002; Giddens 1991) is also clearly present in the idealised manifestations of contemporary celebrities (see Chapter Three). Ideal reflexive individualism

⁸boyd's work focuses on self-presentation through the digital frameworks of online social networking websites (see www.danah.org/papers/). Her name is intentionally written in lower case (www.danah.org/name.htm)

⁹ Myspace is an online social networking site where individuals set-up their own profiles, which include biographical information, personal music selections, lists of other myspace 'friends' etc.

¹⁰ A discussion of reflexive individualism and its ideal forms follows on page 28)

also informed the women's online interactivity, namely their individual contributions to the creation of a parody celebrity elf movie extra. The ideal dispositions of reflexive individuality include possessing a unique personality, being consciously progressive, autobiographically aware and so on (Howland 2007 – see Chapter Three). Ethnographically, the creation and consumption of Figwit reveals the ways in which online engagements facilitated the opportunities for new reflexive individual possibilities for Figwit's creators. This relationship between offline and the online is basis of my theoretical approach and reveals the ways that new hybrid possibilities, both positive and negative, are generated through online mediated identity and community.

The argument for internet/computer generated hybridity was challenged by Marilyn Strathern's reply to Escobar's observations about an anthropology of cyber-space, communities etc. Strathern put forward the notion that the complexity of the internet did not arise from the technology as "there was never any pre-cyberculture" (1994: 226). Indeed, on the surface, Strathern's comment challenges the idea that online interactivity generates new possibilities. However, I argue that Strathern's observation emphasises that the internet must be considered as a continuous development of social and cultural practice. In other words, it is a product of the 'real' or offline world, and therefore the new and novel aspects of online activity are not necessarily new per se. More accurately it is the accessibility, searchability, traceability, speed of dissemination and rhetorical framing processes within online technological configurations that make especially visible the various social and cultural imperatives of post-industrial society. This is new outcome which arises from online interactivity.

For example, the material conditions of online technology, especially the highly textual nature of communications and interactions, made it possible for me to view the Figwit team's message posts on TORn and their FigwitLives news updates many years after they had been communicated. Also, the searchability of the internet enabled me to source news articles about Figwit, and additionally various responses or comments about Figwit that were made

online. Quite simply, without the internet it would have been impossible to ascertain what or who Figwit was beyond my offline social relationships with Bret McKenzie and the documentary makers. More importantly, without the internet it is almost certain that Figwit's creators would have never created a parody elf that achieved such wide social currency, let alone have met or known each other to the point of forming friendly online and offline relationships. In this respect, the complexity and processes of the women's identity and *communitas*¹¹ formations, and their strategic maintenance, is particularly visible through their online interactivity.

What has clearly emerged through online discourse, and is evident in the production and consumption of Figwit, is that the online and offline are inextricably entwined. Therefore online interactivity cannot be seen as something separate from existing social and cultural processes. Since identity and community formation and maintenance occur online it is useful to consider online interactivity as a continuation of similar offline social practices (Cohen 1984). Similarly, the technologically-mediated nature of these interactions cannot be considered as somehow inferior, different or segregated from offline instances of identity and community formation. Furthermore, it should also be examined as an integrated component or outcome of internet technology structures. Moreover, online identity formation and interactivity should also be analysed for the way that online users incorporate the technology into their lives, perhaps in the way that we don't give a second thought to using a telephone, taking a photograph or turning on the television.

¹¹ *Communitas* differs from the social grouping of community, where it is a temporary formation of group identity contingent upon an aspect of shared subjective engagement that achieves "a relational quality of full, unmediated communication, even communion, between definite and determinate identities, which arises spontaneously in all kinds of groups, situations and circumstances." (Turner 1978: 250).

The Anthropology of Figwit

While the rapid ascent of Figwit was a uniquely serendipitous example of an internet phenomenon, the fact it progressed into an offline spectacle reveals some of the new possibilities that can emerge from online interactivity. The consequential cameo appearance of Bret McKenzie in ROTK and production of a documentary film further illustrate the expansive and unintended consequences of an online TORn in-joke created amongst a small group of casual LOTR enthusiasts.

This thesis focuses on the highly dynamic relationship between offline and online, and the new possibilities that arise through online interactivity. One of the primary aims of this thesis is to understand how offline social narratives and practices, such as post-industrial celebrity and ideal reflexive individualism are constructed, negotiated and referenced through socio-technical engagements. As people visibly generate and maintain identities that are consistent with their offline interests (Baym 2000; Hine 2000; Miller and Slater 2000; Wilson and Peterson 2002), I build upon the notion that the lived experience of online is not socially compartmentalised within or exclusive to the users' internet practices.

The dynamic and distinctive dialogic between new online technological frameworks and existing offline social and cultural processes raises interesting questions for identity and community formation. Online social connections, by way of community and friendship formation are therefore best understood as an active hybrid manifestation of both offline and online social processes. The dynamism and technical properties of online frameworks (e.g. inherent textuality, instantaneousness, archivability etc) enable new opportunities for idealised identity construction and community formation. Indeed offline social and cultural processes are incorporated, activated and intensified through technosocial engagements where existing social practices, such as reflexive individualism and habitus-informed social

distinctions, are actively pursued through online interactivity. Insofar as the built-in features of the internet facilitate, constrain and enable participation, they “fundamentally alter social dynamics, complicating the ways in which people interact” (boyd 2007: 121). Thus I argue that the dialogic process between offline-online results in new and distinctive outcomes for online users. For example, the ability to construct, recognise and maintain hyper distinctions between online users, which was particularly evident in the various sub-fields of TORn participation. These included Tolkien purists with a penchant for literary interpretations and analysis of the LOTR novel, LOTR movies fans – both production and actor-centered, Tolkien inspired weapons and warfare enthusiasts and the “swooning, drooling’ girly fans’ whose adulatory fandom for male characters/actors that Figwit parodies (see Chapter Four).

The production and consumption of Figwit essentially reveals the complex dynamism between the offline and online through a lifecycle of an online *communitas*, examining its formation, maintenance and eventual respite. My study of Figwit begins with a cluster of transnationally separated women and their hitherto independent offline appreciation of LOTR novel, which was enhanced by their respective and individual viewings of Jackson’s film adaptation. The significance of their respective offline gendered and sexualised film gaze became apparent in their consequent Figwit-related activities, especially when this formed the basis of their online interaction. Further, the online architecture, which enables users to generate hyper-distinction (see Chapter Four), became evident when the previously unacquainted women sought out one another through the technical configuration of the TORn discussion boards and then progressively developed a *communitas* of shared interest centred on a celebrity parody movie extra. In essence, the configuration of the Figwit women’s technosocial engagements presents an opportunity to understand how post-industrial constructions of identity and community are negotiated and constructed through mediated technologies.

Furthermore, in generating an online celebrity parody, the Figwit creators also revealed their familiarity with contemporary post-industrial celebrity narratives. This opens a space to analyse contemporary constructions of celebrity, in both its highly-rationalised, industry-sanctioned Hollywood star system, and also in its consumer/fan generated expressions, as exemplified by TORn and more specifically Figwit. I argue that the multi-sited, cross-media ethnography of Figwit highlights transnational and pervasive notions whereby contemporary celebrities are cast as exemplars of ideal reflexive individuality (see below).

The complexity of the production and consumption of Figwit clearly highlights the highly dynamic reality of online activity and interactivity as a continuous experience of offline socio-cultural processes and online technological frameworks. Through the ethnography of Figwit and his creators I argue that online interaction is consistent with their habitus-informed dispositions, especially with the offline ideals of reflexive individualism and of the intellectual middle-class imaginaries of parody and irony. Furthermore, I contend that these practices are intensified and idealised through the rhetorical framing and editing that online architecture enables, namely its inherent textuality and searchability that allows users to privilege hyper-distinctive, finely gradated points of difference and to instantaneously form large networks of similarly orientated individuals.

I begin by examining the women's pre-existing LOTR interests and how this provided the impetus for their online involvement. Then I consider the formation of the online Figwit communitas, and the ease with which like-minded others were sought out through online frameworks. My analysis of the Figwit community presents opportunities to examine the different processes of online social connection in the ethnographic experience of Figwit's creators. The women's participation in adulatory, female LOTR fan discussion boards, and the consequential creation of the Figwit parody reveals ways in which online technological configurations enable users to meaningfully construct hyper-distinction between fellow users. Finally, I

examine these shared meanings and common interests, which are used as community-formation strategies in the formation of a cohesive online Figwit collective.

The women's online parody of contemporary celebrity presents the opportunity to consider offline contemporary post-industrial celebrity. I discuss the ideal narratives and practices that are attributed to contemporary celebrity individuals, and historically contextualise the role of celebrities as high status, ideal individuals. This discussion leads to an examination of post-industrial celebrity structures. I introduce the concept of reflexive individualism, a habitus of post-industrial society that has emerged from the institutionalisation of individualism (Beck 1994, 2002; Giddens 1991, 1994) and the ideal dispositions that are generated by this (Howland 2007). I also assess how these ideal reflexive dispositions are attributed to post-industrial celebrities. Post-industrial celebrity construction and ideal reflexive individualism are pertinent to the examination of the Figwit parody and to his creators' online authorship and interactivity. The women's authoring of the elf parody, which clearly imbues Figwit with ideal, yet ironic, celebrity attributes, reveals the degree to which people are aware of these reflexive ideals and its exemplary individual manifestations through celebrity identities.

My analysis of the production and consumption of a celebrity parody elf extra also considers how the ideal reflexive individuality and other dispositions of online users are constructed and performed through their online activity and interactivity. Here I examine the ways that "offline social roles and existing cultural ideologies are played out, and sometimes exaggerated in online communities." (Wilson and Peterson 2002: 456). The women's focus on parody clearly shows how their active participation on the TORn message boards reproduced aspects of their intellectual middle class dispositions and imaginaries. Further, the social validation the women derived from fellow TORn members and from one another, and the excitement generated by increasing visitor numbers to their FigwitLives website, illustrates how their

online interactivity further contributed to the women's highly idealised online identities.

The ethnography of Figwit also reveals the new possibilities and configurations that emerge from the hybrid nature of online interactivity. For Figwit's creators, their online participation tangibly resulted in idealised and intensified opportunities for the expression of habitus-informed social distinction and ideal reflexive individuality. This was particularly enabled by the material architecture of the internet, which allows users to draw hyper-distinctions through the highly textual, participatory, searchable and archived communication practices. The consequent validation of Figwit, which saw him progress from an online discussion board in-joke through to a independent and highly popular website, authored by the Figwit women, in turn legitimated their reflexively-compiled online identities. This was continued into their offline lives, and is best illustrated by the women's face-to-face meeting in Edinburgh, Scotland and partly by the subsequent media attention they received for their creation of Figwit - especially the *Frodo is great... who is that?!!* documentary.

However, I also argue that new emergent offline-online possibilities may be contradictory to the intentions of online users. Figwit's progressive online presence clearly illustrated that the intensified and idealised experiences of his creators were not continuous across the different genres of the internet. For example, Figwit moved from the highly collaborative, yet LOTR-focused discussion boards towards the static and more widely accessible independent website (e.g. FigwitLives). In this transformation, the parody commentary that originated from the hyper-differentiated online TORn environment was not immediately apparent to the broader network of online users attracted to the FigwitLives site and who were not affiliated with online LOTR fandom. Furthermore, the mainstream media reporting of Figwit did not reproduce the parody aspect, but rather exclusively presented Figwit as a bona-fide object of adulatory fandom, albeit generated from the fans-up rather than by

the Hollywood celebrity industry. Moreover, these mainstream media reports cast Figwit's creators were genuine 'swooning, drooling' or 'geeky' fans.

Through this thesis I examine the material properties of the internet and how these intensify, hyper-distinguish and broadcast existing identity and community formation practices. Although the opportunity for different and new outcomes emerge within online interactivity, I argue that these can be understood through existing anthropological thinking and therefore what is observed and experienced through the online are offline identities and communities that are made particularly visible by the technologies in ways which were not previously possible.

Methodology

The argument put forward in this thesis is based on a multi-sited ethnography, which draws from a variety of sources both online and offline. Bruno Latour's actor network theory, which seeks understand people's interrelations with technology, asserts that such research should remain "faithful to the insights of ethnomethodology: actors know what they do and we have to learn from them not only what they do, but how and why they do it." (1999: 19). In this cross-media, multi-sited ethnography I used a combination of participant observation, qualitative online and offline interviews, and analyses of film, print and online media.

My initial research questions focused on establishing a Figwit timeline of events from the women's independently motivated online participation on TORn, through to the consequent atrophy and respite of their elf parody interests. Knowing that my research questions would evolve and change as I moved from observation and towards analysis, I decided the most appropriate research strategy was to begin with participant observation.

At the beginning of this chapter I explained my first encounter with Figwit and the FigwitLives site, and my assumption that this was an expression of

serious and intense LOTR fandom. My next brush with Figwit was when I became aware of a documentary film about the Figwit phenomenon called *Frodo is Great... Who Is That?!!*. During the last few months of the documentary's production and post-production I assisted with simple technical tasks, such as logging footage and collating still images. In this time I met some of the documentary's interview subjects such as Alatar, the creator of the Bret McKenzie website called LetsBretiton (www.istari.f9.co.uk/bret/) and a journalist from *USA Today* who broke the newspaper reporting of Figwit. I also observed much of the editing process, watching the documentary taking shape, and viewed many initial edits of the footage and interviews conducted with the Figwit's creators compiled by the director and editor. Most of my interactions were informal, as almost all of the people involved in the project were friends of mine. I did not ask many research related questions, instead preferring to help out with tasks, and be led by the experience of participating. As this was the beginning of my project, and my interest was in the women's activities, I did not make extensive field notes of the documentary process per se. Furthermore, my early research questions were informed by my impression of the FigwitLives website and what I already knew of LOTR fandom, which was actually very little. However, through my participation with the documentary I became familiar with the timeline of Figwit, and that Figwit was a parody in-joke amongst a group of online TORn users. In other words, I quickly realised that I was not researching serious, stereotypical LOTR fans.

Being closely involved with the documentary production process and its makers proved useful to my research, as it alerted me to the varied ways Figwit was interpreted by different individuals and interests, which consequently became a significant aspect of my analysis. Though I did not formally interview anyone involved with the documentary, throughout my project I discussed Figwit with the director, Stan Alley, as questions arose.

I was fortunate to have unlimited access to the master tapes from the documentary. This was literally unlimited access because the box of tapes

often served as my footrest whilst writing this thesis (and in my ethnographic present, still is). Nevertheless, I greatly benefited from this, as I was able to easily review footage as my ideas developed on this project. I began my media analysis by watching the 30–50 hours of documentary footage filmed on 60 digital videotapes. The footage included interviews with Bret's fellow movie extras, band mates, other artistic collaborators and himself. Interviews were conducted with director Peter Jackson, as well as casting director, publicist, editor and executive producers of the LOTR movie. Also interviewed were actors from the core cast: Elijah Wood, Billy Boyd, Dominic Monaghan, who played hobbits; Gandalf the wizard, played by Sir Ian McKellen and Orlando Bloom who played 'action elf' Legolas in the film trilogy. I found it interesting that many of these interviews took place on the LOTR film set, as third party access to Jackson's film sets was notoriously difficult to obtain. However, as all of the documentary makers were employees of Jackson's various production companies, they had the unique advantage of filming in these locations, including scenes of Bret McKenzie being readied in make-up and costume department as he prepared to reprise his Figwit role in the final instalment of the trilogy as an elf escort in ROTK.

The greatest quantity of the documentary footage was set in Edinburgh 2002, where the Figwit creators met one another and Bret for the first time. These tapes included lengthy interviews with Sherry (9 hours) and Iris. Interviews were also conducted with other Figwit collaborators, Jennifer, Tanya, Beleth and Scottish Tolkien Fellowship members Arielle Schnepf and Gemma. Most of the footage captured the meetings between Bret and women and the activities they went to during their visit to Edinburgh. Much of the filming had an almost holiday/home movie quality, as the subjects were often filmed socialising in pubs, people's homes or around Edinburgh city. Two of the tapes were filmed in Israel, where Iris lived.

From the documentary footage I transcribed over 50 pages of interviews and notes, and logged relevant quotes with the specific timecode, so I could easily find these excerpts if I needed to review the content at a later date, and if

needed, as a consistent citation style in my thesis. I used a very broad approach in my data collection, noting the timecode minute-by-minute in the women's interviews, so as not pre-determine how the data would be used.

From my analysis of the documentary footage some very clear themes around the production and consumption of the elf parody began to emerge. The footage clearly showed that various interviewees conceptualised Figwit differently. For example, there was a difference between his creators' intentions and those of external interests such as the movie-makers and journalists. The footage also revealed how the Figwit creators' differed in their offline interpretations of Figwit, which also became evident in my subsequent interviews with the women.

My media analysis next led me online. I began with the FigwitLives website (www.figwitlives.net), I archived 21 movie and fan art images. I also archived 46 news updates written by Figwit's creators between March and October 2002. The news updates detailed the revelation of Bret's identity, the women's trip to Edinburgh, Figwit fan developments and plenty of links to the newspaper articles reporting on the Figwit phenomenon. The website comprised of many images of Figwit from the movie, fan art, karaoke, poetry, a hate mail page, a page about the Figwit creators, print media articles about Figwit and Bret McKenzie. FigwitLives also has a page of links that list 11 ancillary Figwit fan sites, 57 other LOTR/Tolkien fansites and 8 Bret McKenzie related websites. Of these links I mainly focused on the 11 other Figwit fansites, six of the websites are no longer active and only one was updated within the last year. I was not able to clearly discern whether all of these websites were also in keeping with the parody or serious fan websites to Figwit. Of the sites that were active all of them were amateur fan websites. Throughout my research I have revisited the FigwitLives website to read updates and developments about the website.

My presence on the TORn website was as a ‘lurker’¹² (non-participating observer). Much of my TORn research was to examine the membership process, organisation of the website and obtain information about LOTR references I was not familiar with, for example the difference between the discussion boards and the IRC (Internet Relay Chat) areas. As TORn only archives its message boards for a one year period the online discussions about Figwit, which occurred in 2002, were no longer accessible; given the volume of traffic generated by the various TORn message boards it would be a costly technological effort to maintain information that would be so infrequently accessed.

I was able to access some of the women’s message threads and actual message posts when Iris kindly gave me copy of Sherry’s personal recollections of their Figwit experience. Entitled “The Story of Figwit” (Sherry de Andres, n.d.), this 18-paged document chronicled the inception of Figwit through to the creators’ face-to-face meeting with each other and with Bret. Sherry included excerpts from their online TORn discussion boards, her thoughts about Figwit’s development from online message topic to FAQ and the development of the FigwitLives site. At the end of the document were a few electronic links to some of the message threads about Figwit. While these links proved to be invaluable, the whole document was also useful to my research. Most of the message posts I have quoted are sourced from *The Story of Figwit*, but I have referenced them in the same style as other message posts sourced from TORn. However, direct quotes from this document have been referenced to *The Story of Figwit*.

My final component of the media analysis focused on newspaper and magazine articles. Online news searches for Figwit-related news items yielded 15 unique news articles and 2 magazine pieces between 14 April 2002 and December 2002 from news sources across the globe. I archived each of these and looked for themes in the articles’ portrayals of Bret, Figwit and the

¹² Baym notes: “*Lurkers* read without ever contributing...[they are] people who never post.” (2000:8) Lurkers who are detected on discussion boards are often derided by online users for not participating.

women. My search findings generated many more syndicated articles, which I did not archive.

Finally, I set about contacting the Figwit creators for informal offline and online interviews. My only offline interview was with Jennifer, who had moved to Christchurch to live with her husband whom she had met through TORn (see Chapter Two). I conducted an informal, loosely structured interview with Jen, and we have maintained contact via telephone and email. With the other overseas Figwit creators, I conducted email interviews. I sent Iris, Tanya and Sherry a list of questions, which they emailed answers to. My questions were grouped into three areas:

1. Personal information, including internet and computer usage, their educational backgrounds, residency and employment details;
2. TORn membership: why decided to join, first impressions, Figwit's difference from existing threads etc;
3. Figwit: Deciding to be involved, role or tasks in the Figwit team, meeting Bret and others.

Often we would email back and forth for clarification or expansion on certain questions. I collected over 40 email messages between myself and Iris, Sherry and Tanya. I collated their interviews into separate documents formatted as questions and answers. These email and face-to-face interviews formed the significant part of my analysis, giving insight into the women's motivations for Figwit. It was also interesting to hear and read their recollections and thoughts of their online activities 4-5 years after the Figwit phenomenon peaked. I still maintain email contact with Iris, Jen, Sherry and Tanya.

Thesis structure

I have structured this thesis in a similar manner to the chronology of Figwit, from the women's initial individual navigations of TORn through to the consequent respite of the Figwit community and Figwit-related activities. This structure also closely replicates my theoretical approach that traces the dialogic between offline social and cultural processes and online technological

frameworks, and then assesses the new possibilities that emerge from this relationship.

In Chapter Two I begin my examination of the famous elf parody by focusing on the online social connections of Figwit's creators. I contextualise the women's offline social practices, such as movie-fandom, community formation and the intellectual, familial, educational and vocational middle class disposition toward parody and competencies in online technologies that motivated them to seek out the online TORn message boards. I discuss how these offline interests are reproduced in online networks. The formation of an online community based on parody of LOTR 'swooning, drooling' girl fandom within the online TORn message boards demonstrates how social differentiation and hyper group distinctions were facilitated through the technical conditions of TORn (e.g. topic specific message threads) and how they bring like-minded individuals together. Furthermore, I analyse how this online communitas was actively constructed and preserved through the use of community boundary and maintenance strategies that were built around their shared understanding of an in-joke. I conclude this chapter by discussing the offline consequences of online interactivity, where online communities and networks can lead to intimate and face-to-face offline relationships. Fundamentally, this chapter illustrates the ethnographic influence of the parody celebrity elf in the generation and ongoing maintenance of online social connections.

In Chapter Three I continue with my focus on the ethnographic significance of Figwit by examining offline contemporary celebrity ideals and narratives. As Figwit was an intentional parody of the TORn girl fandom for male celebrities such as Orlando Bloom, his creation therefore reveals key narrative and ideals that inform post-industrial celebrity. I begin by defining celebrity and historically contextualising the concept of celebrity as high-status individuals who are cast as markers of social good. Next, I argue that reflexivity individuality is perceived as a pervasive social good in post-industrial society. Further, I introduce the concept of ideal reflexive individualism and its

narratives and practices. Reflexive individualism is a condition of post-industrial society that has emerged from the institutionalisation of individualism (Beck 1994, 2002; Giddens 1991, 1994) and the ideal dispositions that are generated from this (Howland 2007). I argue that ideal reflexive individuality and associated dispositions are often attributed to, and perceived to be embodied in, contemporary celebrities. I also posit that these ideal reflexive dispositions are transnationally shared, as the parody construction of Figwit clearly references key contemporary celebrity ideals and narratives. In this chapter I also examine the commodified and commercialised nature of contemporary celebrity. Through my ethnographic analysis I examine the convergence between industry and fan interests.

In Chapter Four, I further analyse the dynamic interplay between offline social and cultural processes and online technological frameworks. I examine the materiality of the internet, specifically the different genres of online communication such as discussion boards and independent websites. I examine how these facilitate intensified and enhanced narrative expression and performative displays of users' habitus-generated dispositions - for example Figwit creators' disposition toward parody and social distinction, and their ideal reflexive individuality. I also trace the progressive development of Figwit from online discussion board topic through to his consequent offline cameo in the final instalment of Jackson's trilogy. I focus on how these emergent online-offline possibilities simultaneously affirm and idealise, yet in some instances contradict, the women's online personas. For example, the consequent media spectacle of Figwit demonstrates ways in which offline hegemonic narratives, such as the stereotype of girly adulatory or 'geeky' fandom, may be reproduced and consequently contradict prior online expressions.

In Chapter Five I consolidate my findings from the previous chapters. In this chapter I summarise my analysis of the dialogic and highly dynamic relationship between offline social and cultural process and online frameworks. I assess whether the hybridity of offline post-industrial celebrity

ideals and ideal reflexive individualism expressed within online digital architecture are new, stand-alone opportunities. I also discuss some of the implications of my analytical approach for further research.

CHAPTER TWO: The evolution of an online community (The fellowship of the elf extra)

Introduction

Wilson and Peterson recognise that online interactivity and offline social worlds are a continuum of existing socio-cultural processes, and that recent anthropological research of online practices “illustrate how offline social roles and existing cultural ideologies are played out, and sometimes exaggerated, in online communities” (2002: 456). Recent studies acknowledge that online practices are “embedded” (Miller and Slater 2000: 6) within offline social worlds; and furthermore that online interactivity can generate uniquely online conditions (Hine 2000), which may also carry over to influence offline social worlds (Agre 1994; Wilson and Peterson 2002: 455).

In this chapter I explore the dialogics of offline and online social connections, specifically the formation of a dynamic online community that emerged in the parodying of the LOTR elf extra humorously named Figwit. Beginning with the initial individual and anonymous online activities of his female creators, I trace the shared *communitas* and experiences that were generated within the Figwit experience. I also analyse the consequential face-to-face interactions of the Figwit collaborators, before examining the ultimate atrophy of these social connections and the fading of the Figwit online/offline community. In Chapter Three I expand upon the offline social narratives and practices that informed the creation and consumption of Figwit, namely the nexus of contemporary Western celebrity; intellectual middle class *habitus* and parody; and ideal reflexive individuality.

Anthropology has long recognised that social groups and communities are actively constructed and maintained through a variety of ways such as the deployment of inclusion and exclusion rituals; bestowing of socially valued roles and statuses; establishment of common norms, aspirations and ideals;

boundary surveillance and maintenance mechanisms (Barth 1960; Firth 1971; Murphy 1972). These strategies of community formation and maintenance range from the physical, material, and coercive, but many are also hegemonic and symbolic (Cohen 1985) and are therefore especially mutable and varied in practice. This is especially evident in online communities and practices, which are essentially generated and maintained in highly rhetorical and symbolic mediums. Furthermore online subjectivities and intersubjectivities are subjected to constant contestment, review and editing. Through my ethnographic data I explore how the production and consumption of Figwit evolved into a distinct online community through the visible use of these strategies. I look at how the TORn membership process and the authoring of Figwit as an in-joke were configured to include and exclude various people from the website. I examine the women's shared ideals in generating and pursuing the parodying nature of Figwit, which also served as a purposeful means of validating and distinguishing themselves from other TORn fan collectives - namely, the serious swooning Legolas 'girly' fans. I will also examine the development of roles and statuses amongst the core Figwit team, especially as the online community evolved and the women were recognised as the Figwit originators and were accorded high status by other TORn users.

As online activities are significantly influenced by, and in many respects are a continuation of, offline social practices, any research project attempting to understand online interactivity must examine how the offline informs internet practice. In the ethnographic experience of Figwit I analyse aspects of his creators' offline social worlds, namely their pre-existing appreciation of Tolkien's LOTR, which was further enhanced or awakened by their individual and separate viewing of the film adaptation. I examine their film-watching gaze and its dynamic reconstruction through their online TORn involvement, especially through the women's use of parody and sexualised gaze to create a celebrity elf extra. I also discuss their generic experiences and understandings of the internet and celebrity (see Chapter Three & Four). The Figwit creators' internet use and consequential online community was clearly informed by their offline social and cultural processes such as the habitus and

middle-class imaginaries of tertiary educational, family and occupational backgrounds; but also by narratives and ideals generated by contemporary Western celebrity and ideal reflexive individualism which is the argument I expand upon in Chapter Three.

Insofar as online interactivity is informed by offline socio-cultural processes, the materiality of online technology also significantly shapes people's experiences of it; these technical constraints and configurations of online communication have been extensively theorised and examined by actor networks theorists (Latour 1999, 2005; Mackay et al. 2000; Wittel & Lury 2002). Nevertheless, Hine (2000) notes that people's online subjectivities and intersubjectivities are not different from their offline experiences, but online representations are significantly re-cast as reflexively strategic performances. Hine's research demonstrates that internet users tend to be intensely committed to and focussed upon representing themselves and their opinions as individually authentic, and especially within their particular spheres of interest. Therefore, in this chapter I also analyse the technical structures of TORn, namely the message boards and other forms of online communication used by the Figwit-affiliated women. Here I examine the instantaneousness and open or seemingly democratic features of these communication mediums and how Iris, Sherry, Tanya and Jen were easily able to strategically represent themselves and connect with a broad collective of similarly-minded individuals. In this section I also explain how the women's active online participation on TORn allowed them to establish social connections and realise their Tolkien fandom in ways that they perceived to be problematic or unavailable in their offline social contexts. I next focus on the textuality of the women's communications and later assess the role of the recordable, searchable, and traceable nature of online communications in facilitating ideal narrations of their Tolkien fandom (see Chapter Four).

Furthermore, I also examine the internet's capacity to enable hyper-distinction and specialisation (see Chapter Four). In this respect individuals create and maintain subtle differences in their online personas and in their

relationships to other online users, which can range from forming alliances and affiliations through to strategies of evasion, exclusion, or even opposition. I do this by tracing Figwit's emergence as TORn specific in-joke and the consequential formation of a distinctive Figwit community that was exclusively generated through the online conversations by similarly-minded TORn members.

Wilson and Peterson note that "individuals within any community are simultaneously part of other interacting communities, societies or cultures" (2002: 455), and Agre (1994) also notes that people use "several media to develop their identities in ways that *carry over to other settings*" (cited in Wilson and Peterson 2002: 457 - emphasis added). As a result online interactions arguably create new forms of interactivity and subjectivity that are neither offline nor online, but are a distinctive and dialogic combination of the two. I explore this through the Figwit creator's offline, face-to-face interactions that resulted from their shared online activities, and the eventual ebbing or respite of their Figwit interests. Through this it is evident that individuals' offline interests, life trajectories, and social commitments alter and consequently impact upon their online activities.

Offline social worlds

Individuals' online, socio-technical relationships are extensions of their offline experiences, and as such are informed and motivated by the norms, ideals, aspirations and practices of their offline ethnographic experiences. Two important offline factors fundamentally informed Figwit's creation – namely his creators' prior use of the internet and their knowledge of LOTR. Being proficient computer users, it was not difficult for each of the women to find TORn, or for that matter anything else that they required through the internet. Through my conversations with the women, and through their dialogue in the documentary footage, it was readily apparent that before their construction of Figwit they all belonged to extensive and rich offline social networks within which Tolkien fandom was almost non-existent.

Interestingly, the women's motivations to go online were to socially validate their respective Tolkien or LOTR inspired responses to Jackson's first film, and thus pursue online social connections with other similarly interested individuals. Moreover, as I will discuss their casual offline attitudes to Tolkien fandom meant that this was an exclusively online pursuit for Iris and her friends. The women's navigation of TORn shows that continuities across online and offline can be ethnographically complex and varied.

Reflexive internet use

I found that most of the Figwit team were confident and proficient computer users. Iris generated the idea of the FigwitLives site and built most of the first version of the website, so I anticipated that she would have been fairly familiar and experienced with computer technology prior to the online construction of Figwit:

Me- I was always computer geeky. We always had computers around the house- Apple, Commodore 64 and then IBM. We also got an internet connection pretty early. I've had this free yahoo email account for about 10 years now, I think...(Iris, email interview)

I found this also to be case for the other Figwit contributors, whom were also conversant with computers and the internet. Although Sherry admits that initially she had only used computers for work and had found them boring. This was until she was given a personal computer during an outbreak of foot and mouth disease in England in 2001 when she was severely restricted in her geographical movements:

I just used it for internet at the time to relieve the boredom of a long tiring spring and summer under foot and mouth restrictions. (Sherry, email interview)

Iris told me that the primary reason for using her computer was to access the Internet. I asked her what she did online before she found TORn:

I think I used to check websites for music artists I liked, and online shopping and the other stuff I mentioned [news, information she wanted to find etc]...

Web searches I used and still use all the time because that's simply the best way to find what you want on the net. (Iris, email interview)

From my interviews with the Figwit creators I found that the majority of them lived in highly industrialised societies, occupied the typical demographic of internet users (see Introduction); all had internet-enabled computers in their homes, allowing them uninterrupted online access, through which they pursued their self-nominated interests. For example, Iris and Tanya shopped for books and CDs, check emails and various websites for on an average of several hours per day.

However, prior to TORn, none of the Figwit creators had participated on discussion boards or message threads. Up until their participation on TORn the women had used the internet mostly shopping or for other daily activities pertaining to their respective work and study. In fact, before Jen joined TORn she, like some of her online friends, did not consider herself to be sort of person who would post messages on the internet:

My only thought was that people who did that kind of stuff were real geeks and just – I wouldn't want to be like that. (Jen, interview)

None of Figwit's contributors I interviewed had developed friendships through the internet prior to their involvement with TORn, and had never been members of any other online communities. My interviews with Iris, Jen, Sherry and Tanya clearly show that each of the women individually and independently chose to navigate the internet based on their self-determined interests. While individual enactments of choice are not new or unique to online interactivity, the prior online experiences of the women show that each of them were adept in navigating the World Wide Web to source what was of interest to them – which, in this specific case, was initially to obtain more information about LOTR.

The novel, the film, the website - prior Tolkien fan tendencies

Given the women's independent, but mutual, interest in the online LOTR discussion groups that was prompted by the release of the movie, I was interested to know about their prior relationships with Tolkien's book LOTR and any forms of offline Tolkien or LOTR fandom. In Chapter One, I noted the Tolkien fan scene, particularly the loyalty of Tolkien's fans and their deep affection for the LOTR story. Within this scene are offline and online communities, fellowship and faux guilds of interest ranging from scholastic with almost theological and mythological attachments to LOTR through to groups who focus on the environmental and nature oriented conservation messages they perceive in LOTR. There are also weapons and battle-focused groups, and many other sub-fields dedicated to the novel that are quite distinct in their interpretations of Tolkien's work.

However Iris did not consider herself to be a serious Tolkien "addict":

I was given the LOTR trilogy as a birthday present when I was 12 years old. I loved it (even though I misread the name Frodo and pronounced it "Frudu" for years). I tried reading the Silmarillion around that time but it too complex for me (tried it again at age 21 and loved it). I was always a casual fan, though. I didn't check Tolkien websites or even tried to hunt any of his more obscure books (though I did read other books and I also own a few [Tolkien] art books). I was never a hardcore fan, I probably read LOTR 5 times? Compared to other serious fans it's not a lot. So yes, I was a Tolkien fan before the movie, but the film trilogy made me into a bigger fan by bringing it to life and letting me meet other people who were fans. (email interview)

Sherry definitely did not see herself as Tolkien purist either, describing herself as a casual to moderate fan:

I've only read The Hobbit and Lord of The Rings. The Sil[marillion] bores me senseless. UT [Unfinished Tales] I've only read in parts of. Other Tolkien works I've no interest to read ever. I loved LOTR as a book, enjoyed The Hobbit but was never rabidly fannish or geeky about it all. (email interview)

Out of the Figwit team, Tanya was, by far, the least familiar with Tolkien prior to the release of FOTK:

[Ralph]Bakshi's version of the Hobbit (was it Bakshi?), anyway, it was so hideous it actually kept me from reading either the Hobbit or the Lord of the Rings. I have a nightmare of that thing from childhood. It was sincerely that traumatizing. I only read the LotR the night before the premiere of the first movie. I still haven't read the Hobbit. I fail hard at fandom. (email interview)

Thus the Figwit creators engaged the online environment that was specifically dedicated to Tolkien's LOTR as fans of the movie of LOTR who had previously read the book. They were not Tolkien purists or dedicated offline fans who had intentionally watched the LOTR movie to critique its differences from the book. In fact this difference between offline Tolkien purists and casual fans came to be a significant online distinction made on TORn discussion boards. The Figwit creators were chiefly motivated to simply view how Peter Jackson had chosen to visually depict Tolkien's LOTR, especially through the deployment of movie special effects and the aura of Hollywood celebrity actors. Being casual, movie fans, meant that Iris, Jen, Sherry and Tanya were cast as distinct TORn users and were thus associated with a particular area of the TORn discussion boards, namely the 'swooning, drooling' boards, which I discuss below.

Eyes on the movie screen – the isolated fan gaze

Fundamentally, these women were prompted to go online after having seen Peter Jackson's FOTR, as were many millions of other movie goers. I asked Iris why seeing FOTR made her go online:

So I watched the first movie and loved it...It was only natural that I found TORn- it was the biggest most popular website around. (email interview)

Tanya, in her interview for the documentary, also stated that she was motivated to visit TORn after seeing the movie:

I was looking for information on the trailer, the review that was supposed to be coming out on the end of the movie [FOTR]. And I figured that if anybody knows, it's gonna be the big fans, and they'll be talking on the message boards and all that, so I went there. (documentary interview)

Jen's motivations were also similar to her online friends:

I was in front of computer a lot but needing to work, but looking for something else to do. And right at that time was when the first LOTR movie came out. I was always a big Tolkien fan so the movie just absolutely blew me away and wanted to find out what other people thought about it. And a little bit of internet searching led me to TORN...(interview)

The substance of the women's motivations were made especially clear when I discovered that Iris' first message posting on TORN was about the attractiveness of heart-throb blonde elf Legolas, which I examine below. Nevertheless, this was not a sentiment shared by Iris' offline friends, who were not as enthusiastic about the film as she was:

I was with 2 girlfriends and 2 other guy friends] and I said "did you see that wicked elf in there" and they were "what? No! What is wrong with you?" And then I thought, "right, maybe I need to find some other friends". (email interview)

While her friends did not dislike the film per se, it is evident that the movie did not resonate with them in the way that it did for Iris. In this respect Iris' reaction to the movie, and especially her sexualised gaze on Legolas and her subsequent online efforts to connect with similarly disposed others, highlights the degree to which people's online interactions were prompted by similar and often highly distinct offline enthusiasms for the movie and/or the book. Furthermore, it also highlights how various capacities of online technologies facilitate the recognition and intentional connection with like-minded others. Moreover, such online relationships were sometimes intentionally sought out because they were absent from the women's offline social milieus:

Since I didn't have any "real life" friends who like LOTR (the friends I went with did like the movie but it's not the same), I went online looking for someone to fangirl/boy with. (Iris, email interview)

Also for Iris there was a very real perception that finding similarly minded people was not a possibility in her offline contexts:

I'm guessing there are [offline LOTR fans], but I don't know them, my friends are not fans, they've seen the movie, they like the movie, but that's it. [Documentary footage]

In this respect, the socio-technical environment provided a space for Iris and her friends to actively enact their newfound Tolkien fandom, which may have otherwise remained as latent, unrealised feelings and relationships offline. What this also shows is that although the internet is an individually-negotiated mechanism, it may be utilised by people to seek out like-minded others and in doing so pursue social validation of their self-determined interests and reflexive dispositions.

Existing offline communities

Wilson and Peterson recognise that online technologies:

exist in the social and political worlds within which they were developed, and they are not exempt from the rules and norms of those worlds.(2000: 462)

In this section I look at some aspects of the Figwit creators' offline social worlds, especially how these motivated and influenced their online interactivity. For example, Jen was working on her PhD dissertation and found that going online was a perfect distraction and leisure activity, especially as she was already in front of her computer:

See, my typical day would start out with feeding horses and taking the dogs for a walk, and then get back on the computer and just be working on my dissertation, so I would start typing, and type a little bit, then check the boards, type a little bit more, go check the boards. (interview)

Similarly, in Sherry's case, being resident in a geographically isolated area during the foot and mouth outbreak, the internet provided intense and interest specific social contact that was otherwise limited in her offline situation. However, it was not a lack of offline relationships that encouraged the women to seek social connectedness online. The documentary footage showed two of the Figwit creators in their respective homes in Somerset, England and Hod-Hasharon, Israel. The footage contained interviews with

some of Iris and Sherry's neighbours and friends, and though some of them were not aware of the women's online profiles, it was clearly evident that these women were part of highly social communities and not friendless, socially-isolated loners, which online fans are often stereotyped as.

This demonstrates that Figwit, as an intense online activity, did not replace their creators' offline social interactions, but instead the internet was deployed as an opportunity for wider, reflexively-determined, interest-based social networks that were quite specific in purpose. In a sense the women's 'feelings' for the movie were kept separate from their offline realities – as is evidenced by Iris, who said that none of her friends were Tolkien fans and neither did she know any Tolkien fans in her offline social networks. Thus online communities do not necessarily replace offline social worlds, rather through online communications technology people are able to realise their ideal or imagined offline social worlds through predominantly textually-based online relationships.

The Thinking Woman's Legolas

I have explained that offline social worlds are enacted through online technical frameworks (see above) and that the dialogic between the offline and online provokes intensified ideal reflexive individual possibilities for online users (see Chapter Four). Here I argue that online users' existing offline habitus and dispositions, specifically their education and social distinction backgrounds, inform their online interactivity and are also intensified when mediated through online technical frameworks.

The women's use of parody and irony in their online interactivity clearly references and reproduces intellectual middle class imaginaries. The creation of Figwit as a counter to 'swooning, drooling' Legolas fangirls reveals that their intentions were to socially distinguish themselves from these particular fan practices. This was particularly evident when Figwit became known on the TORn message boards as 'the thinking woman's Legolas'. This

characterisation of the parody elf extra gives insight into how social distinction may be manifested in online engagements and also the ways that such practices are generated through online technological architectures (see Chapter Four). In other words, through Figwit's emergence as a viable alternative to the swashbuckling, blonde, elf 'himbo' (male bimbo), Legolas, we are alerted to the ways in which the women negotiated TORn so that their online experiences better reflected their intellectual middle class dispositions. Furthermore, analysis of the dialogic of online technological configurations and users' existing offline habitus, dispositions and social distinctions opens the possibility for understanding how and why an online network of LOTR fans created hyper-distinctive cliques and delineations (see Chapter Four).

Middle class habitus and dispositions

The expression of habitus, dynamically enacted through personal and collective tastes, dispositions and social distinction strategies, influences the potentialities of where individuals may be located and ranked in various fields of action. Habitus generates dispositions towards the utilisation of economic, social, cultural and symbolic capitals and is the means by which people construct and negotiate social codes to produce "well nigh inexhaustible possibilities for the pursuit of distinction" (Bourdieu 1984:226) With regards to the creation of Figwit – a non-speaking extra ironically imbued with the qualities usually reserved for a bona fide Hollywood star – I argue that this characterises what Bourdieu calls the intellectual middle class penchant for "liking the same things differently, liking different things, less obviously marked out for admiration..." (1984: 282). In other words, their inclination toward irony and play, especially in artistic and intellectual endeavours.

The intellectual middle classes, who possess high amounts of cultural and social capital, but lack the material wealth of the often less intellectually adroit wealthy dominant class, assert ironic and alternative ways of consuming culture to differentiate themselves and in doing so are typically "content with developing a unique mode of appropriation." (Bourdieu 1984: 282) In this respect, parody, which is a satirical or humorous skewing of

normality, may be considered as a disposition particularly found amongst liberally and tertiary educated middle class individuals.

Bourdieu also recognises that the middle classes are constantly involved in reflexively maintaining, creating and repositioning themselves in relation to others in various fields of action, and in attempting to differentiate themselves from their adjacent dispositions (Bourdieu 1984). Through the production and consumption of Figwit the women's use of such differentiating strategies are particularly evident. Furthermore, the recreational construction of Figwit (see below) illustrates how online technological frameworks, especially the inherent rhetorical and textual structure, are particularly suited to the expression of middle class social distinction that seeks to express a "distance from necessity" (Bourdieu 1984:56). Arguably the capacity for the Figwit women to discuss the attractiveness of elves and also build a website for the purposes of a parody elf was informed by their offline habitus, and especially their middle class dispositions for irony and social distinction.

Playing with elves: middle class parody and irony

The consumption and production of Figwit were directly informed by the creators' offline Tolkien practices, their middle-class intellectualism and their subsequent experiences of online Tolkien fandom. This is most obvious in the women's use of parody, which posed Figwit as a deliberate exaggeration and humorous imitation of the existing online adulatory fan practices.

Bourdieu identifies that the practice of irony and parody are intrinsically middle class traits (1984:44-47) derived from the educational experience of middle class individuals, whom often undertake tertiary education, and are adept in making and articulating critiques and deconstructing narratives. These class-informed practices are often evident in fan media consumers. For example Gamson's (1994: 142-170) survey of American media consumers found that individuals with higher incomes and levels of education engaged in more ironic and critical readings of celebrity media, such as gossip magazines,

movies and other associated products, than lower waged and less educated individuals. Gamson found that the consumption patterns of lower socio-economic media consumers were genuinely adulatory of celebrities and less critical of celebrity media reports than the ironic and critical media consumers (1994: 160).

The Figwit team's obvious use of parody, through their exaggeration of TORn 'swooning, drooling' fandom, and imitation of contemporary movie actor celebrity constructions (see Chapter Three) clearly reveal them as highly aware and ironic media consumers. However, I was interested in examining why the women were particularly drawn to distinguishing themselves from existing TORn swooning and drooling practices, especially as their initial impressions of TORn were a positive alternative to their offline LOTR contexts.

Bacon-Smith (1992) and Hills (2002) both note that fandom is frequently stereotyped as 'low-brow', 'low culture' pastimes. Both argue that fan practices are unfairly marginalised and misunderstood and where both seek to positively legitimate fan practices, the salient point is that their studies illustrate the low profile accorded to fan activities. Although Bacon-Smith and Hills' discursive intentions are outside the scope of my thesis, from my observations of the online TORn message boards it was evident that some TORn users were aware of these negative characterisations of fans, and that these were reproduced in their critiques of teenybopper Legolas swooners. In other words, there were ethnographic reasons why people, including fans themselves, replicated these negative characterisations of female adulatory fandom. In fact, Sherry was unequivocal when she explained how she did not want to be perceived as a 'swooning, drooling' fangirl:

I'm not a swooner or not a fangirl or any of that. She (Iris) doesn't want to be perceived in that way- and I don't want to be perceived in that way. And I hope the [Figwit Lives] site to people, is genuinely funny, if you don't laugh at all of it, you'll at least laugh at some of it. (documentary interview)

To Iris the parody was explicit in the intentional swooning and drooling over an unnamed, non-speaking elf movie extra with a less-than-three-second appearance, and further through assigning him qualities that were more commonly associated with the major movie characters. She explained how Figwit was a deliberate exaggeration of the sexualised, adulatory LOTR fan practices:

His body was covered with the robe so that left us with the face- his features and expressions. I don't think he ever really pouted, though. I think Sherry came up with that one and it stuck. He does seem regal (I'm guessing those were instructions from the director) but the whole pouty/broody/smoldering [sic] thing was made up by us - it wasn't really part of his (Bret's) performance. We made a Tall, Dark and Handsome character out of him. (Iris, email interview)

Furthermore, the collaborative, near instantaneous and widespread dissemination of the initial Figwit online message threads facilitated an intensified parody creation where multiple users were able to simultaneously contribute to the emerging parody elf character, which provided a basis for them to create and progressively substantiate their online in-joke. For example, Jen explained how they would tease and mock Iris for liking Figwit:

We had lots of jokes about him, we'd tease Iris about him and say that he was be unable to speak, he was clearly too stupid to speak and just lots of teasing like that. (Jen, interview)

The Figwit team were highly aware that they were essentially imitating and ironically skewing accepted online TORn message board fan practices, which were predominantly 'swooning and drooling' over Legolas and other main LOTR characters. In their creation of Figwit, the women imitated the regular 'swooning, drooling' characteristics and attributed them to a bit-movie extra, who was the complete antithesis the popular blonde elf:

The fake "rivalry" with Legolas is also made up, of course. It came naturally because they were similar and yet opposites- two young and good looking elves but one is blond and the other is a brunette. One is from Mirkwood and the other from Lothlorien (canon rivalry), One is silent and passive and the other talkative and passionate. Not to mention- it was funny. Every good little

slash girl also knows enemies and opposites attract and that's where the "companions" innuendo comes from. (Iris, email interview)

Here, the detailed and ironic imitation of Legolas demonstrated the women's understanding of existing fan practices and their understanding of how to subvert fan knowledge, particularly in their reference to slash fiction¹³. In this respect the Figwit creators' demonstrated their deployment of intellectual middle class imaginaries, especially where the women actively and deliberately cultivated difference and novelty in relation to the existing fan practices on the online TORn boards. Furthermore, such developments clearly demonstrate the women's proficient and progressive use of online technologies that arise from their middle class and tertiary education backgrounds.

Educational and technological habitus

In addition, the opportunities for Figwit's creators to make dispositional investments were greatly enhanced within the socio-technical frameworks. The ethnographic examples above illustrate how creating and maintaining the Figwit parody quickly became an integral element of the women's online TORn experience, especially as the women's Figwit activities progressed and resulted in the launch of FigwitLives.

Lash argues that the middle classes are structurally inclined to be familiar with online technologies as consequence of their occupational and financial capital access (1994: 167). Moreover, global and domestic online participation rates (see Chapter One) reveal that online access is strongly influenced by socio-economic status. Thus, Lash sees online technologies and practices as being predominantly shaped by the middle class dispositions of the majority of online users (ibid).

¹³ Slash fiction is a genre of fan authored fiction that highlights potential heterosexual or homosexual relationships between main characters, commonly male characters such as Captain Kirk and Dr Spock from the movie/television series of *Star Trek* (Bacon-Smith 1984).

Analysing the construction and consumption of Figwit, it is evident that the progressive development of Figwit's online presence was significantly assisted by the women's individual technical and textual abilities. In their interviews, with the documentary makers and me, the women discussed their respective roles that contributed to the ongoing maintenance and development of FigwitLives website. The women's personal contributions to Figwit were greatly enhanced by their pre-existing technical and written skills, derived from their middle class, educational and occupational backgrounds. For example, Iris, took responsibility for the technical aspects of FigwitLives:

I built the site, didn't take long – took like 10 hours, it's really simple. And I'm really clueless about these things. I set up the music because I do all the technological stuff. (documentary interview)

Iris' technical competency was due to computers being an integral part of her upbringing and therefore an integral component of her habitus:

Both of my parents are quite technical and have computers for each person in the house. And we're networked together...I started using the Internet when I was 17. I've been around computers. (Iris, documentary interview)

In addition Sherry, whose previous experience with computers had been primarily vocational and who also wanted to pursue creative writing as an offline hobby, gravitated to similar tasks in FigwitLives, finding it a good opportunity to be creative:

I think with FL's [sic] I was much the same. I enjoyed the writing more, and Iris liked managing the technical side. She also had a better computer and a quicker internet than I did. More equipped to deal with the site management. (Sherry, email interview)

In her documentary interview, Sherry also explained that the creativity she experienced through Figwit was at that time in stark and desired contrast to her offline life, employed on a farm and living in a small village in south west England.

Arguably, early adoption of computer technology, which was evident in Iris' family as her parents' were highly-skilled in the field of electronics, illustrates Iris' middle class habitus in terms of family background. Further, at the time of her active participation in FigwitLives, Iris was an undergraduate psychology student, who has since graduated with a Bachelor of Arts majoring in Film and Communications – so her family habitus was essentially reinforced in her educational habitus.

Jen similarly came from an intellectual middle class background where both her parents were tenured academics. As an only child, Jen explained how she accompanied her father on many research trips overseas. Jen, also an academic, who was completing her doctoral dissertation at the time Figwit was created, clearly reproduces her intellectual middle class habitus by desiring to be literarily creative:

I occasionally help out with that [some writing] and I guess my big role is to lay geeky editor, I'll handle some technical writing details and the boring stuff that nobody else wants to do...I have a bunch of other writing that I'm supposed to do that's terribly creative, so what I get bored with that it's fun to take a break and do something more entertaining. Yeah it's fun. (Jen, documentary interview)

In addition, Tanya described herself as “an art school dropout” (email interview), and has a close relationship with her computer:

We weren't attached at birth, but as damn close as one can get. Mainly, though, I used the PC for work, games, online shopping. (Tanya, email interview)

Ethnographically, the Figwit creators' habitus clearly equipped them with the technical, textual and creative capacities required for their chosen online parody activities. In their possession of the requisite financial and technical capitals to build a website, and also deploying the necessary cultural capital in online textual communications to negotiate the specific terms of their elf parody, the women's respective intellectual, middle class habitus is clearly evident. Even though none of them had built a website until FigwitLives, the possibility of doing so was a realistic endeavour for the women to pursue.

Incidentally, the revamped (current) FigwitLives site is a testament to technical expertise they acquired over time, especially as the website looks more professionally produced and the technical structure of the website conforms with best practice in HTML¹⁴ coding.

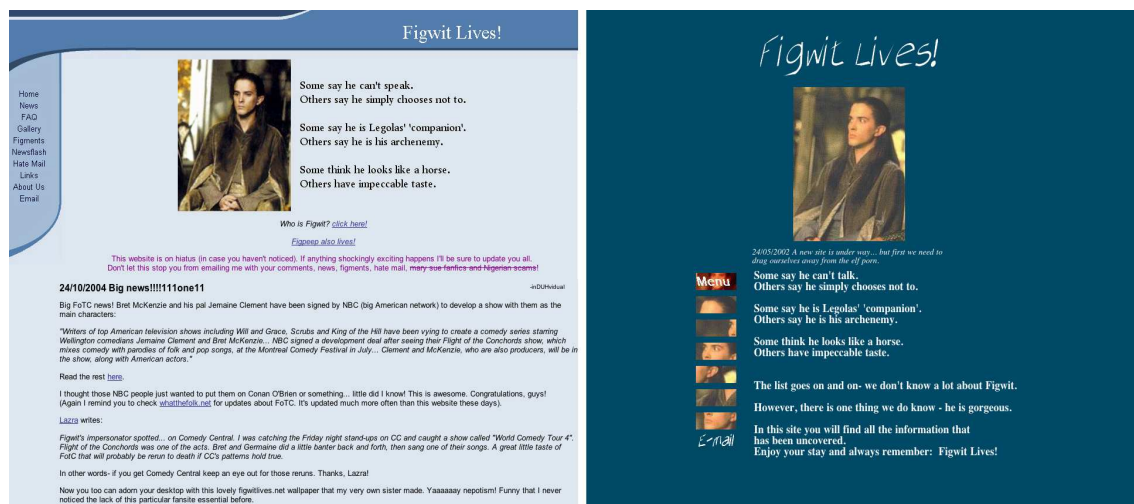


Fig.3. On the left is the current FigwitLives homepage. On the right was the original home page (Courtesy of www.figwitlives.net)

For Sherry the experience of Figwit has encouraged her to maintain and build other websites to this day:

[Figwit] was the foundation for a great deal of my internet use today continuing into the Conchords site but now I'm expanding out with other projects slowly and moving away from them also...With regard to running websites, I've gotten to be a bit of an old hand at it now. It often proves time consuming and as the Conchords popularity grows, I seem to be spending more and more time working on the site to keep it to the standard I set myself. I prefer just doing the creative side of it, the writing and so on, and would rather leave the technical aspects to someone else, but as there is only me, I am unable to do so. [Sherry, email interview]

Tellingly the collaborative aspects of online interactivity greatly enhanced the women's capacity to generate Figwit. Some of the women told me that none of them could have exclusively made Figwit, in fact Sherry was adamant that it "Wouldn't be fun doing this on your own" (documentary interview).

¹⁴ HTML is an acronym for hyper-text mark-up language which is the text command language used to build internet websites.

Furthermore, through their online interactivity the Figwit creators were also able to enact and experience individual dispositions in more intensified online ways than through their offline lives (see Chapter Four). This was clearly demonstrated by the women's appreciation of the personal creativity that they derived from producing Figwit. The backgrounds of the Figwit collaborators reveal them to be highly-skilled web users who, in addition to their unique interpretation of TORn fandom, were able to develop this shared interest into a website through a combination of their social, cultural and technical capitals.

Distance from necessity

That the Figwit team made the choice to be involved and actively participate in the ongoing authoring of Figwit certainly confirms that the women had the requisite economic and leisure capitals to facilitate these activities. Although Sherry and Iris had previously authored the Figwit FAQ, comparatively the website demanded more work and commitment from the Figwit team. In her documentary interview Sherry explained the difficulties of working across different timezones, making decisions through email and instant messaging,¹⁵ saying "It's hard to fit around day-to-day life as well." (documentary interview). However, this did not alter her commitment during the period she was involved with the Figwit phenomenon. The time and effort the women put into their recreational Figwit activities plainly demonstrated a particularly middle class distance from necessity and associated desire to engage in conspicuous leisure activities (Bourdieu 1984: 53).

The women's active dispositional awareness and investments were particularly apparent in their response to Figwit's future, which was to stay non-commercial, and to be loyal to the online LOTR fan network, where they received positive social validation for their distinctive parody elf activities. For example, in the following excerpt from the documentary footage, Iris and

¹⁵ Instant messaging refers to real-time text communication between two or more users. Commonly used applications are *Yahoo! Messenger* (<http://webmessenger.yahoo.com>), *MSN Messenger* (<http://webmessenger.msn.com>), and more recent *google talk* (www.google.com/talk).

Sherry explained how they would never make money from their Figwit activities, as this would betray their intended outcomes for Figwit:

Iris: I just want to make sure no one else makes any money out of this. I don't think that anyone would want to.

Sherry: You never know. But we're not in it for any money at all - it costs us pennies.

Iris: If we ever do, do something like this – Figwit is going to die like that [snaps finger]. It came from the fans, and once you involved money in it....

Sherry: [Interrupting] If you turn it into a commercial, turn it into a marketing thing. It worked for what it is, it was a simple fan-based, humour, and it's just something people can relate to and there's nothing contrived about it, it just happened.

Iris: So money would just kill it.

(Iris and Sherry, documentary interview)

Iris and Sherry's responses clearly reveal their awareness of the highly commodified and commercialised contemporary celebrity, but also the social and cultural capital that Figwit earned them. So while, Figwit was an ironic, playful expression of online TORn fandom generated by a group of intellectually inclined middle class women, the value that the women derived from these dispositional practices was clearly serious online social distinction that arguably belied their previously casual, LOTR movie fan status.

Becoming an online TORnado¹⁶

Although the potential for highly reflexive and idealised interactions clearly arises in online experiences, most socio-technical constructions are not necessarily radical works of fiction:

[N]ot all online selves are fantasy beings and that not all online communities are constructed as places to be alternative people. (Baym 2000: 202)

¹⁶ TORnado is the term active TORn members refer to themselves as.

In fact when joining TORn, there were several non-negotiable processes, for example individuals had to create a unique screen-name, password, online biographical profile and submit personal details such as their email address and age. These non-negotiable processes of membership demonstrate that individuals abide by and are constrained by the online architecture and the website administrators. Moreover, there was significant social compulsion to create Tolkien inspired screen-names that referred to the LOTR mythological world (see below). In both respects the online capacity to create fictional personas was determined – both limited and enabled - by socio-technical conditions established by TORn administrators and members.

I also discuss Iris and her friend's online activities, especially their participation in the 'swooning, drooling' threads. This reveals the strategies of hyper-differentiation deployed by TORn users, which were significantly enabled by the dynamic textuality of their online interactivity (see Chapter Four). I was particularly interested in the women's subsequent resistance to serious, adulatory elf fandom and the degree to which they were reflexively attuned to actively differentiating themselves through their intentional elf parody. However, even as their online fan practices evolved into online social relationships, their differences were still framed and informed by the generic context of Tolkien fandom, which was most evident in their consequential creation of a Figwit website and FAQ. What is particularly revealing in the women's activities is how online interactivity simultaneously enables users to connect with a very large network of like-minded people and also actively create difference and social distinction.

Below I analyse Iris, Jen, Sherry and Tanya's encounters with online Tolkien fandom, I explain that their online interactions, relationships and development of an online community were informed by social rules, etiquette and sanctions that had commonality with their offline social and cultural practices.

“Forged by and for the fans...” – becoming a TORn member

Having established what motivated them to join the TORn website, I was interested in how they were incorporated into the TORn socio-technical environment and what attracted them to the discussion boards. I asked Iris for her initial impressions of TORn when she first encountered the website:

In one word - enthusiasm. The message boards were VERY busy with fans who were just as excited as I was. It was a very lively community. As far as content goes it had all the topics you would expect to see - "funniest moments", "best lines", inside jokes (I don't remember any now), speculation about the future movies, news discussion and of course Tolkien discussion. It was very hectic but that's what made it exciting! (Iris, email interview)

Jen and Tanya, who joined TORn a few weeks after Iris and Sherry, initially found TORn – with its intense and varied social aspects - to be an exciting and fun place:

I just wanted to see what other people thought about the movie, and I found this message board, it seemed like people on it were having a lot of fun...(Jen, interview)

In their responses the women stated that they found the website to have appealing qualities, which is what prompted them each to become active on TORn. For Sherry, the important aspect of TORn was the fun, although her experience clearly shows how the technical constraints of the technology can also impede or momentarily disrupt desired social interactivity, and that online relationships are inescapably bound to these material realities:

[It was] maddeningly frustrating trying to post anything during busy times. But it was a lot of fun also. So many people were having so much fun and finding humour from Fellowship as a film. (Sherry, email interview)

These independent reactions of the women show that their expectations of fun were fulfilled, furthermore upon entering an online community of like-minded LOTR fans their enthusiastic responses to the cinema adaptation of Tolkien's story were also socially validated.

Joining TORn – from lurker to member

Finding that the website resonated with their interests, each of the women next undertook the process to become members of TORn. The membership process reveals the structured nature of TORn interactivity, namely that TORn user identities were constructed through specific, technically constrained steps. Structured aspects of TORn community-formation are especially evident through the membership process where users had to consciously comply with non-negotiable practices in order to be a participant of this online community and to be able to post messages and interact with other TORn users. I explore how the membership processes specifically contributed to the formation of an online community and how Iris, Sherry, Tanya and Jen negotiated these.

To join the TORn community a user needed to first construct their online persona by creating a unique nickname. In her interview for the documentary, Alatar,¹⁷ creator of the now defunct Bret McKenzie fansite “Let’sBretItOn” explained the significance of an online nickname:

A lot of people use nicknames on the internet partly because they want to show a bit of their personality from the name they choose, you can't do that with the name you're just given, or a loyalty to a particular fandom, like you get with a lot of people with Tolkien names. Also having a nickname makes you a slightly anonymous, so you feel a little more comfortable getting into talking about what you like and meeting other people because you're all on the same level. And a lot of the nicknames online you can't always tell if it's a girl or guy behind it which is actually quite useful when you're online. (documentary interview)

Alatar acknowledged the benefits of online community membership structures, citing the ability to autonomously and anonymously construct an online identity through quite specific formats that essentially ensure that the mode of communicating fan affiliations or personal interests are in a sense egalitarian, or are at least not mediated through offline considerations of gender and so on. As Alatar's quote pointed out, the conditions of TORn membership instilled some sense of egalitarianism amongst the user

¹⁷ Alatar is one of the Blue Wizards in Tolkien's mythological Middle Earth. Little is written about these mysterious characters.

communities where everyone had to author themselves within the boundaries of the profile page, and by doing so every named and biographised individual demonstrated a commitment to this online community. Other democratised aspects of the website were the users' complete access to other users' bios and previous message posts. In a sense users had open access to one another's web genealogies. Although online communities such as TORn are structured to enable egalitarian access and interactivity, social exclusion can occur through mechanisms such as sending personal messages to others who share similar interests or sensibilities. In fact the creation of Figwit clearly demonstrates that an exclusive online community can be formed through individuals collusively sharing an 'in-joke'.

Moreover, Alatar and others also demonstrated their LOTR knowledge and dispositions in the nicknames or screen-names they chose. This was evident in the names the Figwit creators chose for themselves. For example, Sherry and Jen's names, ArwenElf¹⁸ and Roheryn¹⁹, publicly communicated to other TORn users their affiliation to, or appreciation of elves. However, Iris and Tanya in their screen-names did reference LOTR. Yet, by calling herself InDUHvidual, a reference to the Dilbert comic strip series²⁰, Iris' choice of name still adhered to conventions of TORn by showing she was an enthusiast of intelligent and 'geeky' humour. Similarly, Tanya's name, ProBono, a word play on the front man of rock band U2's name, also demonstrated a creative and clever use of language.

Another compulsory component of the TORn membership process, was the requirement of a publicly accessible online profile or biography (bio for

¹⁸ Arwen Evenstar, half elf and man, she is one of the few prominent female characters in Tolkien's story, who eventually marries Aragorn in the final volume of the trilogy. She is notable for given up her Elven immortality to be with Aragorn.

¹⁹ "So I found the name of Aragorn's horse, which was Roheryn, and I kinda liked the way it sounded. And I figured if you were going to be ridden by somebody, you might as well be ridden by the future king of Gondor - so I thought that was pretty good." (Jen, documentary interview)

²⁰ Dilbert is a long-running daily comic strip series satirising a typically over-managed white collar office. Dilbert is syndicated to 2000 newspapers in 65 countries. InDUHviduals refer to the "dimwitted future servants of the DNRC [Dogbert's New Ruling Class]". Dogbert is a dog that harbours intense disdain for stupidity and wishes to enslave all humans. (see www.dilbert.com).

short). Users provided information about themselves, which in addition to their message posts and other contributions, were publicly accessible to users (and lurkers, like myself) to find out more about an individual poster. Individuals were not required to reveal any personal information in their biographies, however it would automatically detail their date of TORn membership and the number of message posts the individual had made and could display the content of these messages. However, many individuals chose to reveal their personal first names, gender, geographical location, and email address. Many members also answered questions about how many times they had read LOTR and what their fan affiliations were (e.g. elves and dragons). Some individuals took advantage of optional biographical postings such as links to their personal websites, detailing their occupations and other hobbies or interests. In comparison with other mini-biographies I examined on TORn, the Figwit creators did not disclose personal information to the same degree. Instead, I found their responses to occupation and interests were deliberately obscure and absurdly humorous when compared with other users' profiles. For example, Sherry stated on her biographical posting that her location was "UK halfway up a hill" (TORn, n.d.).

In this respect the Figwit creators displayed a sense of fun that the women later emphasised was important in their TORn interactions and which subsequently informed their parody creation of Figwit.

Although some message threads may have included aspects or references to the users' offline lives, the point is that the manner in which users could be monitored and recorded significantly differs from that of offline communities. In online communities the technology of the internet enables traces of online interaction to be freely reviewed by others, or edited by the author or administrators at a later date. Thus the process of TORn membership shows that people consciously author themselves, by way of choosing their own name, and through the overtly textual and technologically prescribed renderings of their online personas.

Destination: “Estrogen Island”

Once each of them had become members, with Jen and Tanya joining only after they had encountered Figwit whilst ‘lurking’ on the TORn message boards, all the women now had access to directly post messages onto the discussion boards. Through my data it became evident that Iris, Jen and the other Figwit contributors met specifically on the movie discussion boards, which was fitting that their online Tolkien involvement was spurred by the movie. TORn was strictly organised into specific topic and interest areas. Through the women’s navigation of TORn it was evident that although they perceived online interactivity as open and egalitarian, the processes of social incorporation into specific interest areas is actually closely monitored by members. For example, an individual posting inappropriate, off-topic, negative or poorly informed messages in a specific interest area may be exiled through other members not replying to their message or by being reprimanded.

Through my ethnographic data it is evident that the prior passive or casual LOTR fandom of Iris, Sherry, Jen and Tanya, and their subsequent decision to go online in response to the LOTR movie, had a significant impact on which parts of TORn they effectively participated in and which TORn communities they affiliated with. Thus the women were initially drawn to the ‘swooning, drooling’ threads rather than the Tolkien pursuits or discussions about Balrog wings²¹. Through their online navigations the women were able to overtly realise their adulatory, female fan gaze which was directed toward the cinematic representations of elves. As previously noted, offline the women were not able to necessarily socially validate these sexualised gazes or enter into discussions about these with offline friends. I asked Iris what this online environment - of the movie boards and the elf discussion threads - was like:

I think TORn always had a lot of female users (the majority, even) so it's no surprise to learn there were a lot of threads dealing with the sex appeal of the men in the movie :). (email interview)

²¹ Balrog wings are an in-joke amongst LOTR fans. The subject of ongoing debate amongst Tolkien fans, references to it show that a Tolkien fan is familiar with long-standing debates or issues in the fan scene.

Jen told me that she was similarly overwhelmed by Legolas when she saw the movie. The other Figwit associates' Elven admiration was clearly demonstrated through their choice of screen-names (e.g. Arwen Elf and Roheryn) and their lurking or active presence on these particular boards. More telling, in their documentary interviews and in their website text, the Figwit team admit they were 'perky elf fanciers' (PEFs), which differentiated them from 'perky hobbit fanciers'. In fact for Iris, discussions about the blonde heart throb elf, Legolas provoked her initial participation:

When the first movie came out I was all over that guy... but then I got over it when I realized his character is a little one dimensional and Orlando Bloom is not a great actor. (email interview)

The area of TORn that Iris, Sherry, Jen and Tanya met on – “Estrogen Island” – was populated by fangirls, and Iris' description of them clearly highlights their adulatory, gendered and sexualised gaze:

We also had something that was called "Estrogen Island" which was basically a very large thread filled with pictures of hot men (not just from LOTR), posted and drooled on by the users. Estrogen Island threads were posted once a week, maybe? It wasn't anything crude though. "Swooning" is the right name for it. So yeah, there was already a lot of that on TORn when I joined. (email interview)

Interestingly the online environment, which was essentially a safe setting for fangirls to 'swoon' and 'drool' over the different male cast members without criticism or backlash, and also highlights how the configuration of TORn allowed LOTR fans to easily congregate with similarly inclined individuals. Indeed Bacon-Smith (1992) argues that fan practices provide a space for individuals to engage in adulatory practices that could otherwise be marginalised in everyday life. In this respect the 'swooning, drooling' TORn threads enabled the girls to engage in compartmentalised, sexualised and adulatory 'fangirl' practices which they did not pursue offline and furthermore their online practices did not attract offline ridicule or criticism.

Online gazing, swooning and drooling

From my interviews with the Figwit producers and my observations of a selection of their message threads on TORn I familiarised myself with some of the events, comments and banter that took place between them. In this material I discovered that these women navigated towards a specifically female fan-gaze oriented area of TORn. It was obvious that this particular area of TORn was a highly-sexualised space where mostly self-identified female users would discuss the physical aesthetics and desirable qualities of the LOTR male characters and also the male actors that played them. Yet, within this specific socio-technical environment I found that fans were again acutely aware of their differences and similarities. For example, those involved in ongoing fan rivalries between characters would debate whether Legolas was a proficient warrior with his bow and arrow, or if Aragorn was a better horse rider. Such fan rivalries were best demonstrated in the Arena discussion boards²².

On these particular boards, discussions ranged from humorous to very detailed commentaries and interpretations, with initial FAQ conversations about Figwit being good example of this (see below). The online interactivities of TORn users, particularly on boards, plainly showed how the medium cultivated hyper-distinction, specialisation and recognition of differences amongst regular members.

I was interested how Figwit's creators perceived these boards and how they involved themselves in the intensified and heightened sexualised adulatory practices that I had observed in this specific online environment. Despite these boards being a fun place that was "full of innuendo and naughty stuff" (email interview), Iris also observed that:

The usual "swooning" threads were playful but everyone was serious about the... swooniness.....(Iris, email interview)

²² Further detail about the Arena discussion boards can be found at www.theonering.net/rumour_mill/thearena/

An important aspect of the boards was that users were compelled to communicate that they especially liked one male character. Even though I had a fair idea of how TORn discussion forums typically functioned to essentially create settings of social inclusion and exclusivity – especially through informed, witty, intensely detailed and opinionated commentary, replete with specialist jargon and in-jokes - I did not expect that the admiration for a male character would be so specifically segregated by age, as Iris explained to me:

The older women went for Aragorn, Boromir and Elrond. The younger girls naturally gravitated towards the younger Legolas... They really DID think Aragorn is the best.thing.evar [sic]! (Iris, email interview)

Iris' observation of age-distinctions across fan affiliations interested me, as it had not occurred to me such social differentiation would be so prominent in online networks. For the Figwit team their affiliations to elves were plainly obvious in their names and in their initial message posts, but it also clearly reflected their relatively similar ages, which ranged from the early twenties to early thirties. Their age range located the women on the cusp of Legolas or the older age bracket of fandom, their exclusion from this younger girl, swooning and drooling fandom motivated their parody creation of Figwit. Iris and Jen told me about the 'Legolas swooning' that dominated these discussion threads being a significant factor for the creation of Figwit. Iris explained that "those new young users who would occasionally post a few "omg legolas is soooooo hot dont u think?????????????????" (email interview) and then disappear forever". Such posters were often derided as "fan girls" by serious Tolkien enthusiasts, and even by Iris and her friends as people who were simply clogging the system with posts that were not constructively contributing to the 'swooning, drooling' community by essentially being too immature and over-the-top in their fan adulation and by not contributing to ongoing discussions or other TORn group activities.

From my observations of the discussion boards I noted that users occasionally conducted lengthy and heated threads debating what constituted too much

swooning and drooling. Within such threads, arguments on the etiquette and exact purpose of message board activities were passionately and intensely engaged. Such discussions highlight some of the social constraints that inform individual online textual-technical interactions. As online conversations are text-based, archived and recorded, users are able to repeatedly author their own postings and to finely scrutinize, contest, edit, and/or reference one another's messages with relative ease. In this respect they are more readily able to construct and maintain highly nuanced and precise socio-textual distinctions that may not be so readily generated in face-to-face conversations. Thus users, like the Figwit creators and others, were sensitive to extremely subtle differences that were not necessarily significant or obvious, and perhaps even non-existent, in their respective offline lives.

I also noted that in these discussions people possessed a strong sense of reflexive and intersubjective awareness, consciously articulating both their perceived differences and convergences in relation to other online members. Such autobiographic and biographic awareness clearly influenced and informed their respective constructions of online Tolkien communities and especially their elaborate and nuanced boundary maintenance strategies. In one such discussion thread, in which users debated the merits of their 'swooning, drooling' activities, Iris as InDUHvidual posted the following message:

Well many people are tired of the estrogen [Island] threads they take up most of the boards every week. (InDUHvidual, TORn message post, n.d.)

Iris' negative reaction to the intensely adulatory female fan gaze on this area of the TORn website reveals the sentiment that she believes motivated her to create of Figwit. Furthermore, it also shows how online discussions provide users with opportunities to openly criticise idioms that they do not like, which may or may not gain support from other users. In the creation of Figwit, Iris found like-minded others. Jen also told me that Figwit was an obvious foil to the serious 'swooning and drooling', expressing the "feeling that we needed to make Figwit." (interview) Iris and her friends' participation on the 'swooning,

drooling' boards demonstrates how socio-technical engagements can become very focused on constructing and maintaining distinctive communities of interests. Moreover, it also shows how there are readily validated and accessible mechanisms for people to contest existing online practices and to consequentially create their own online communities of interest, as evidenced in the production of Figwit.

Creating Figwit: a point of difference

In this section I develop an analysis of the highly precise and subtle distinctions that online users draw through their TORn activities, showing how online interactivity is well-suited to generating these highly-pronounced differences. I am focusing on the women's relationship with the existing TORn community, and how through their Figwit discussions they formed their own distinct fan community.

I found that Iris, Jen and their counterparts' growing distaste towards the intense girly adulation, which then subsequently propelled the creation of Figwit, emphasised their casual or less intense fandom within TORn.

Iris explained to me that

This atmosphere ['swooning' and fan-girl obsessed Estrogen Island discussion boards] was definitely something that was needed for the creation of Figwit.. (email interview)

Through the creation of Figwit these women began to distinguish themselves in a manner that was meaningful on the TORn forum. Via their elf parody they differentiated themselves from both the serious Tolkien enthusiasts and the 'swooning, drooling' fan girls, who were also seen as serious or intense, but for the wrong reasons.

While looking at the excerpts of the message threads where Figwit was first mentioned, I noticed that these were posted on a serious movie discussion thread. Here, in what was a typically genuine Tolkien fan discussion, Sherry

as ArwenElf discussed what she regarded as the most poignant moment in the pivotal Council of Elrond scene with other TORn members:

When Frodo announces to the council that he will take the ring blah blah...well the look on Gandalf's face and in his eyes, he has this resigned look, sad, almost like he knew it was coming but still didn't want to hear it. Priceless (Sherry/ArwenElf TORn message post, n.d.)

This posts shows that the TORn socio-technical environment enabled Sherry and the other Figwit contributors to also converse about serious aspects of the film with similarly-minded online individuals. In this context they especially shared their thoughts and responses to the visual aspects of the LOTR movie, thus emphasising that their LOTR orientations were strongly based on the movie. Although throughout my interview with Sherry she chiefly focused on the humorous aspects of her involvement with TORn, thus illustrating that online fan subjectivities are as multi-faceted as people's serious and humorous offline identities. Nevertheless, the shared sense of humour that Sherry and Iris developed through their online exchanges is demonstrated by the following reply that Iris as InDUHvidual posted to ArwenElf's previous comment:

Oh! OH! Oh! I just remembered something! When he [Frodo] says that, and everyone is looking at him there is *the * most gorgeous elf on the far right. He took my breath away! Move over Legolas! *Breath * Sorry. I just had to share...(Iris/InDUHvidual, TORn message post, n.d.)

From this initial discussion thread InDUHvidual continued to make adulatory posts and requests for other TORn users to keep a look out for the unnamed elf when next seeing FOTR. In contrast, ArwenElf mocked and teased InDUHvidual for her seemingly over-the-top obsession.

He was a bloke with a wig and skinny legs! And he probably had a REALLY squeaky voice which is why they gave him no lines..." (Sherry, as Arwen Elf in response to Iris/InDUHvidual, TORn message post, n.d)

ArwenElf also teased InDUHvidual for her bad taste:

He's not [special] unless your [sic] inDUHvidual and have NO TASTE AT ALL!!! LMAO. (Sherry/ArwenElf TORn message post, n.d.)

It was this particular message post that prompted the creation of Figwit's name:

You want a piece of me?! Don't you dare disrespect Figwit...(Frodo Is So Grea... Who Is That?!). (Iris/InDUHvidual, TORn message post, n.d)

From my observations, requests such as InDUHvidual's and ArwenElf's teasing were not unusual message board practices, and in fact such dialogue fundamentally characterised them as regular TORn movie board users. Many TORn posts asked fellow users to look out for certain continuity errors, actors, characters, scenes or other such details in the movie. Correspondingly, mocking and teasing other users for their preferred characters, or particular consuming passions, was also common practice on this section of the website. In fact, an entire discussion forum, known as Arena, is set aside for users to stage mock discussion battles between characters.

In the Arena forum ArwenElf and InDUHvidual staged battles between Figwit and Legolas. The banter between them and other TORn users, while humorous, resembled other online discussions that I had encountered in my research of Tolkien fan sites where serious fans argued over, or celebrated, the respective merits of major characters such as Aragorn, Frodo, or Legolas.

Although, Sherry and Iris did not view themselves as serious, dedicated Tolkien enthusiasts or swooning fan girls, their use of TORn clearly characterised them as genuine, active TORn members engaging in common practices that were routinely considered appropriate amongst those participating on the website. These practices not only informed the tone and norms of their online interactivity, but formed the basis of their online friendship. Thus the formation of online communities is not only influenced by the instantaneousness of socio-technical engagements and the capacity to repeatedly construct, trace, and respond to multiple and interconnected pathways of online dialogue, but also generates continuous opportunities for

the creation and maintenance of very specific and nuanced points of difference.

Forging friendships through fans

In this chapter I trace the evolution of the Figwit community and discuss where the women intentionally deployed community-formation strategies in this process. In this section I look at how the women's cultivated their casual, non-serious fan identity and especially their insistence on humour and fun, which became the central focus of their online common-interest association. In the early stages of Figwit's production, the women's explicit intentions illustrate how online communication practices can facilitate high levels of reflexive awareness in individual users.

I was interested to know what motivated Iris to respond to ArwenElf with a gushing post about the gorgeous elf extra, and what kind of response she anticipated from making such a comment:

It was a moment between friends and a new thing to giggle over. I figured the conversation that will follow is bound to be entertaining and funny so I mentioned it! It wasn't particularly naughty or irreverent. (email interview)

To Sherry and a handful of other posters, Iris' humour was clearly evident in this post. In their respective documentary interviews, Sherry and Tanya explain how Iris' humour appealed to them. In fact throughout my interview with Sherry she frequently stressed the sense of humour and fun that she shared with Iris over Figwit, and that this was a major motivating factor for her involvement. For Jen, Sherry and several other posters, the humour in the parody was plain to see and enough to get them involved in Figwit, and to consequentially evolve into a distinct community within TORn.

Jen also explained how Figwit contrasted enough from the regular 'swooning and drooling' that she encountered on the website, which did not appeal to her enough to 'de-lurk' or develop a validated online identity in the way that the intelligent humour and cleverness of Figwit did. However, in Jen's case,

the particular humorous expression of Tolkien fandom motivated her enough to become an active participant on the TORn site and this therefore illustrates how varied engagements with socio-technical communities can enable users to seek out online practices that best align with individual reflexive interests:

I just liked Iris' sense of humour and thought she was funny, and then got on the same with Sherry and Tanya. We had lots of jokes about him, we'd tease Iris about him and say that he was unable to speak, he was clearly too stupid to speak and just lots of teasing like that. (Jen, interview)

To Jen, Figwit was a running in-joke that they could all contribute to and play with. However, as Sherry admitted, most of the women's play was made at Iris or InDUHvidual's expense; thus I wondered whether being teased and mocked by other posters for her interest in a three second appearance of the elf extra was as fun for Iris as it was for others. Iris, said however that the others' teasing it did not bother her as she simply assumed that the subversive nature and parody of Figwit was obvious to other TORn users:

With Figwit it was obviously done with humor. Most people were just playing along with it. I don't think anyone (including myself) truly did think Figwit was as equally worthy of attention as Aragorn or any of the other main characters. So when someone posted “*swoooooooooooooooooon*” I'm fairly certain they didn't really do it because Figwit was making them faint. (Iris, email interview)

Iris' comment shows how the women were purposefully distinctive from other fan collectives on the TORn website, through being explicitly irreverent and ironic about their fandom. More than this, the ease with which these women's self-oriented web engagements developed into a shared ideology of fan parody reveals key aspects of their online communitas:

Well, you just start posting to people that you think are interesting or funny, or whatever. And then eventually sharing your [email] address with them, then you start emailing and then you eventually get into chatting with them. (Jen, interview)

Thus, through such online socio-technical engagements individuals reproduce many of their offline ideals and specific interests. The construction of an

online Figwit community clearly reflects a form of *communitas* or interest/context-specific and temporary forms of social networking. This is particularly obvious when his collaborators' offline *habitus* (e.g. educational background) influenced their online activities, which I have discussed above.

“Let’s do something really stunning????” – The making of the FAQ

As Figwit became more popular on the website, the women's activities around Figwit intensified. The evolution of the women's friendships and their Figwit activities is especially obvious in Sherry and Iris' decision to develop a Figwit FAQ. The establishment of an independent Figwit FAQ within TORn occurred approximately a fortnight after Iris and Sherry first discussed Figwit, which demonstrates how quickly new online communities of interest can develop. Having initially developed Figwit through Arena battles and various message threads, Iris, Sherry and their friends now clearly shared a set of ideals and traits that they collectively attributed to their celebrated elf extra. The development of their FAQ also shows how they deliberately and explicitly subverted existing TORn fan practices. The women's FAQ participation is increasingly detailed, elaborate and independent, furthermore they purposefully author a distinctive parody that is instantaneously recognised and validated by other TORn users.

The following post is ArwenElf's immediate reply to InDUHvidual's Figwit FAQ suggestion:

...So, what can we say about him? Ideas, discuss! I'm all for it. *Can we do something really stunning???* Pleeese. Do, lets, so much fun to be had here!! Those ppl [people] want to know we should give it to them!! LOL (Sherry's TORn post, n.d., emphasis added)

Sherry's response to Iris/InDUHvidual also shows that these women were being recognised as the creators and experts of Figwit, thus legitimating their roles as the founders of this emerging online community. I found that both Sherry and Iris approached their “secret FAQ project” (Iris/inDUHvidual TORn message post, n.d.) with considerable dedication and effort, especially

in terms of definitively outlining Figwit's core characteristics and valued qualities:

AAAAAAAARRRRRRRRRRRRRRGGGGGGGGGGGGEEEEEE
sorry, the board(or my computer) is
VERY slow today... took me 25min just
to load your post!
email/TORN- no difference to me. you decide!
funny level- LOL [laugh out loud] I'm not even sure we can control
it... lets just do it and see what happens
what info?!
his name is Figwit
he has dark hair
he's a hottie
he doesn't say much
sits between Aragorn and some old elf
looks cute when he is surprised
(from the Arena) uses silence to make people *very* uncomfortable in a way
that makes them want to confess/ask forgiveness/run away/braid his hair
er... not a lot to work with! (Iris, TORN post, n.d.)

I noted that Iris and Sherry were quite explicit in what they wanted to create. For instance, they discussed how humorous the FAQ would be, and what sort of information would be contained in the document:

whispers about that secret project..
maybe we should just make it a big list of "we don't
know"
age:
we don't know
eye color:
umm.... we're not sure
real name:
let me check... nope. we don't know.etc.etc.etc. [Iris, TORN post, n.d.]

ROTFLMAO!!! [rolling on the floor laughing my arse off] Brilliant
Go for it. But always a but throw in unconfirmed sightings. And a few 'we
wish we knew' and 'wouldn't you like to know' and interview Q's where he
answers "..... .." That'll really confuse us! (Sherry, TORN Post,
n.d.)

"Who the hell is Figwit?"

The creation of the Figwit FAQ also reveals that the creators were highly cognisant of, and familiar with, ideal celebrity narratives such as the aesthetic beauty that is typically attributed to contemporary movie actors (see Chapter

Three). Firstly their awareness and manipulation of movie fan narratives reproduced the mainstream, adulatory and sexualised gaze routinely articulated by the online 'swooning, drooling' female fans. However, their parodying tone simultaneously distanced themselves from such mainstream fandom, which did not particularly appeal to them. However, with regards to the formation of an online community, the development of the FAQ makes explicit the intentioned and constructed nature of their online community. This highly distinctive and increasingly independent sub-TORn community eventually evolved into a separate website, FigwitLives, constructed by Iris and others, and which was solely dedicated to the parody of Figwit and to maintaining an online presence for Figwit followers.

The creation of an online Figwit community also demonstrates how the textual, recorded and easily revisited character of online communications provides opportunities for socio-technical interactivity that can quickly generate distinctive online communities. The instantaneousness and scope of online forums clearly enables a great many people to connect simultaneously, and to create or recognise their shared interests in ways that are simply not possible through offline face-to-face engagements. This is especially evident in the way that new, inexperienced TORn users were unaware of Figwit, which was at this point an exclusively online and TORn phenomenon. In fact as Figwit gained a profile within TORn message boards, I observed his creators and supporters express their sense of online social distinction through their in-depth knowledge and understanding of this parody. Through my interviews with the core Figwit contributors and my analysis of their message threads, it became evident that understanding Figwit denoted seniority within the TORn community, as new users were often perplexed by the celebrated elf extra and moreover, had to appeal or subordinate themselves to more knowledgeable TORn users to be 'let-in' on the in-joke. For example, to new TORn users like Tanya, the adulation, rivalry and hubbub surrounding Figwit discussion threads indicated that something important was happening although she didn't understand what it was or its significance with the wider TORn network:

Iris – InDUHvidual- had his picture in her footer of her messages [see below] – all her messages. This little thing above that says ‘figwit lives’ and everybody who’s new comes in and they would ask – well eventually – because people would talk about figwit and how gorgeous and pouty [sic] he was - this gorgeous elf. And eventually, if you were new, you had to ask - it was almost like a hazing ritual. Then you get in there [the discussion thread], and you have to ask and then everyone makes fun of you because you don’t know who figwit is. You go back to your classic Lord of The Rings book and flick through all the pages and say “I don’t see figwit! I don’t see figwit, who the hell is he? Is he in the movies?” ...Tanya (documentary interview)



Fig. 4. The picture of Figwit used in Iris’ TORn message footer

Sherry and the others were not only aware of the confusion that surrounded Figwit’s identity and a lack of an awareness that Figwit was a parody, especially for new TORn members, but enjoyed the social distinction and status that was attributed to them as Figwit’s creators. In fact in their documentary interviews and in my interviews with them they all repeatedly stated that they enjoyed the confusion and positive attention they received as a result. Within the TORn environment fan practices, such as teasing, drooling, fake rivalries with other main characters and InDUHvidual’s message footer (see above), made it difficult for some users to distinguish parody or in-jokes from the serious fan rivalries and adulation.

Thus Figwit activities began to evolve into a more elaborate and defined community. Jen explained to me that questions, like Tanya’s, about Figwit’s identity often established who was new to the board. Tanya explained in her documentary interview, that after being made fun of for not knowing Figwit’s identity her initiation into the emerging Figwit community still continued:

[E]ventually either ArwenElf or InDUHvidual would come on and post their little FAQ on who figwit is –which didn’t answer anybody’s questions, but it was really funny. At least it was really entertaining so that’s how you find out who figwit is...(Tanya, documentary interview)

However, for Figwit contributors and supporters, who were already familiar with the in-joke, Figwit represented something unique that no one was doing on TORn:

It [Figwit] was all for fun and there was an element of (unplanned) parody in it – of fandom in general (by obsessing over the smallest details) and of fangirls (the LOTR drooling and celebrity crushes in general). (Iris, email interview)

By Jen’s reckoning, Figwit was something novel on TORn , and “was unique in that regard” (interview).

The whole figwit thing is really cool – the whole thing, *it was just really cool to be in on the beginning of this cult phenomenon* that I knew was gonna eventually happen, I could just tell it was going to national somehow, someday. And it was cool that I was there and knew who figwit was. (Tanya, documentary interview, emphasis added)

From what Iris and Jen told me, and from the information I gathered from the documentary footage, it was apparent that the creation and maintenance of Figwit provided an opportunity for moderate Tolkien fans to enact their own subversive sense of fandom and to be affirmed by others who also shared this similar sense of humour. Reproducing the Figwit in-joke became something that defined them as a group. In fact as awareness of Figwit’s identity spread through TORn, so the profiles and status of his creators were also enhanced. For instance, because Figwit’s significance was so ambiguous to some posters – particularly new members – ArwenElf and InDUHvidual often fielded questions or were referred to by other posters to explain the importance and identity of their mysterious pet elf. In this sense the Figwit parody distinguished these TORn fans amongst themselves, especially in terms of being a “true” or “hardcore” LOTR movie fan, as this post shows:

I still prefer Legolas, but I think it is very funny to drool over Figgy because only true fans know who he is. Anyone outside TORN wouldn't have a clue, it's this insider thing. If you can drool over Figwit, it means you are a true hardcore movie fan, it separates [sic] us from the rest of the people who watch the movie!!! (Tauriel, TORN message post, 30 March, 2002)

Tauriel's comment illustrates the extent to which users explicitly articulated and constructed fine distinctions within the TORN movie discussion boards and how Figwit developed into well-defined online community. Moreover, the online ability to recognise and reproduce such distinctions clearly functions as a community inclusion and boundary maintenance mechanism, as individuals unable to comprehend or replicate these shared idioms can be excluded from meaningful participation in online networks.

Being friends online

Throughout this section I have discussed some of the unique properties of online interactivity, for example, the users' acute generation and recognition of subtle differences, and their ability to textually nuance and refine these distinctions. In the process of cultivating Figwit, I also examined the formation of more intimate social connections amongst his creators, which are especially evident when Iris and Sherry began to communicate privately through email and instant messaging and begin to recognise this as a genuine friendship. Despite their exclusively textual friendships, the women's experiences show that offline social connections, such as valued friendships can be formed through online interactivity.

Many of the women expressed surprise at the good friendships they had formed through this online experience. They were also surprised at the amount of interest their little in-joke attracted. Sherry describes the burgeoning friendship between her, Iris and the other women as their message threads about Figwit became more frequent and detailed:

Iris and I had a lot of laughs swapping posts about Figwit. Others seemed to join in discussing him as time went on, but I am not sure they got the same thing out of it that Iris and I did. Then away from the forum we got emailing

and chatting on IM [Instant Messaging] and wrote the Figwit FAQ. (email interview)

As the women became familiar with one another through the message boards, their friendship evolved beyond the open discussion board environment towards a more personalised and intimate type of communication. This was also evident in how they began to address each other through intimate nicknames and developed in-jokes through their messages. For example, Sherry and Iris shared references to existing online jokes such as individuals wearing tin foil on their heads to protect them from mind-control. They also generated and shared new online terminologies such as “thunk”, which means to fall off your chair in surprise:

We made our aluminuium [sic] foil deflector beanies and I coined the THUNK. I took to calling DUH inDUHvidual FIGWIT sweetie. She called me shmoopie. (Sherry, Story of Figwit, n.d.)

Also, in their documentary interviews, they often used shortened versions of their screen-names, for example Iris would often be referred to as ‘Duh’ (short for InDUHvidual) and Jen was ‘Ro’ (short for Roheryn).

Figwit Lives online and offline

The creation of the FigwitLives website essentially took the elf parody beyond the TORn environment, which I investigate in more detail in Chapter Four through examining the online and offline implications it had for Figwit’s creators. Here I focus on how the Figwit community became a more defined entity than its previous TORn-only incarnation. Through the development of the FigwitLives website, the core group of contributors were clearly demarcated, which also enhanced the social connections they had initially forged through their TORn interactivity.

After the Figwit FAQ was published other TORn members contributed similar fan-associated materials, such as limericks, poems, fan art, karaoke and photos. Sherry, in her Story of Figwit describes this particular time:

This [the material contributed by other TORn members] lead to the creation of Figwit Lives. Somewhere to give all the work done a home. Iris disappeared from cyber space for a couple of days and emailed me about the site. She asked me to come on board with it and together we founded Figwit Lives. Iris had the basic layout and some stuff already set up and we then set out to include the material created by other posters and some ideas of our own. A few cryptic posts to people and emails to ask permission to use their work on the site and we were away. (*The Story of Figwit*, n.d.)

The development of the FigwitLives website also demonstrated the women's increased commitment to Figwit, in comparison to their previously unstructured or spontaneous message threads on the TORn discussion boards. Iris, in her documentary interview also talked about the creation of the FigwitLives website

It was my idea, basically a really simple, one-page website with a picture and some information. Just post the link every time someone asks about figwit – which happened often, [at] that time. And I did that, and it was nice, but ideas kept coming up, like with the karaoke, and the songs people did, or the arena battles we did with Legolas and Boba Fett. And you couldn't put that all on one page, so that's when the idea of the whole website came up. (Iris, documentary interview)

Iris also explained that the website was a “little joke” (email interview) for friends and amongst friends. To Iris and Sherry the FigwitLives website focused and maintained the integrity of their LOTR parody, but it also solidified their friendships. Their commitment to the creation and ongoing upkeep of this website clearly shows the emergence of a structured and dedicated online community, especially as the site's initial development was only known to their team. The website was launched towards to end of March 2002 and was shared amongst TORn posters, some of whom were already ‘in’ with the joke, whereas others were confused further by this apparently new, but seemingly important, LOTR character.

In June 2002 the core Figwit team, who variously resided in Israel, United States of America, Germany and England, made the decision to meet one another offline. The women were prompted by the impending appearance of the New Zealand comedy duo Flight of the Conchords, featuring Bret McKenzie at the annual Edinburgh Fringe Festival. The women arranged to meet each other and Bret at this event. Sherry explains why:

Iris, Jen, Tanya and I decided it'd be fun to meet up as we'd become firm friends online by then. FoTC [Flight of the Conchords] appearing at the Ed[inburgh] Fringe [Festival] simply made it the logical place for us to converge on and meet up. (Sherry, email interview)

The women duly met Bret McKenzie and spent several days together whilst being tailed by a documentary film crew. Although all women speak fondly of meeting one another, noting also that their online and offline conversations and shared interests clearly converged, their face-to-face interactions were nevertheless constrained by other factors, for example, the geographical distance between their respective residences meant that on-going offline interactions would be costly and time-consuming to maintain. Furthermore, their online interests diverged over time, for example, immediately after the Edinburgh trip Sherry ended her involvement with the FigwitLives website shifting her attention to building a Flight of the Conchords fan website (www.whatthefolk.net). Iris' online interests also moved away from Figwit towards boys' love²³, a genre of Japanese comics (*manga*) and animated films (*anime*). The specific and limited online conditions of their shared Figwit interest was also made more apparent by their respective offline commitments, for example, at the time Iris and Jen were both completing university studies, while Sherry and Tanya were both in paid full-time employment. Other factors that contributed to the eventual atrophy of the Figwit community were beyond the women's control, as Iris explained:

²³ Boys' love characters, also known as 'BL', or *shonen ai* refer to the Japanese *manga* and *anime* character who is created as a "composite in both appearance and temperament of elements of nineteenth-century European aesthetes and decadents, the Vienna Boys' Choir, and androgynous celebrities such as David Bowie. This beautiful boy is visually and psychically neither male nor female; his romantic and erotic interests are directed at other beautiful boys, but his tastes are not exclusively homosexual." (Welker 2006: 842)

I guess it really ended after the third movie was released. There was really nothing more to do with Figwit after that... internet memes and phenomena have such short lives so it's amazing he even made it that far. (Iris, email interview)

Although these examples suggest that single-interest based online interactivity is limited by people's offline contexts, other examples from the online Figwit community clearly illustrate how intimate and ongoing offline relationships emerge from online interactivity. For example, Jen's online courtship with a fellow TORn user, who is now her husband, and together they have many ongoing friendships with other TORn members:

There's quite a few people on there [TORn] I know quite well. We had 23 people from there at our wedding, including one that came from England. (Jen, interview)

Consequently, Jen's marriage led to her relocate to New Zealand from the USA. Although, Jen admits that she does not post as frequently on TORn as she previously did, I observed that it was an important online community that she still actively maintained social ties with, where even her infant son has his own screen-name and has received birthday wishes from other TORn posters. Thus, Jen's experience of TORn clearly demonstrates the influence and ongoing significance online interactivity can have on people's offline social contexts. Similarly, Alatar's holiday to New Zealand enabled her to meet Bret, in person. Despite meeting her in a casual, social manner during her visit, the documentary-makers, Bret and myself only knew Alatar by this online name. Consequently, I found out that the Figwit team were not aware of her offline name either and thus illustrated the degree which online-generated personas and activities can have tangible offline social consequences.

Summary

Throughout this chapter I have presented examples of community formation and maintenance strategies in the production and consumption of Figwit; from the TORn membership process that each of the women undertook, giving them the access to post messages and actively participate on the website, through to the subsequent 'in-joke' Figwit represented to other medium TORn users. These particular examples demonstrate that online community formation and maintenance strategies may differ little from those on offline communities and that there is a tangible correlation between offline social and cultural process and those of online interactivity.

Yet, insofar as the evolution of the Figwit community shows that people do form distinct common interest association, regardless of whether they are on or offline, Figwit's production and consumption does reveal some unique traits of online community. The fact that a seemingly inconsequential movie extra mentioned in passing on a message board is developed into a parody elf heart throb with his own fan website shows that the offline/online dialogic is an amalgamation of pre-existing dispositions and new, technologically-mediated contexts.

Online interactivity presents the opportunity for individuals to actively realise offline social interests and connections in quite specific ways. Through my ethnographic material I contextualised Jen, Iris, Tanya and Sherry's individual offline relationships with LOTR and showed that that the film adaptation of Tolkien's novel played a significant role in activating their otherwise latent/non-existent offline Tolkien fandom, as their respective readings of the film prompted them to go online. I also looked at their familiarity with online technologies, and established that TORn was their first ever active encounter with online communities. It is clear that the women's online Tolkien fandom was noticeably informed by their offline adulatory

gaze, prior computer skills and LOTR appreciation; resulting in their participation on the ‘swooning, drooling’ message boards that predominately focus on the aesthetic qualities of the male characters through conspicuously sexualised, feminine adulatory fan practices.

The speed and ease with which Iris and her friends first discussed Figwit, and consequently built a website showcases the online medium’s ability to facilitate intimate and highly-focused social connections. The evolution of Figwit also tangibly demonstrates how the technical configurations of online communications are used by people to cultivate hyper-distinctive associations. In part the social connections forged by the core Figwit team show how online interactivity constrains and also facilitates hyper-reflexive subjective and intersubjective expressions (see Chapter Four). In part, the friendship that emerged through the women’s shared interest in the Figwit parody was motivated by their desire to be socially distinct from ‘swooning, drooling’ Legolas fans and Tolkien purists. This demonstrates how socio-technical engagements can facilitate the specialisation and hyper-recognition of differential capitals that are potentially unavailable or problematic in individual’s offline social contexts.

Although there is the potential for online activities to be compartmentalised from offline social and cultural contexts, as evidenced by Sherry’s offline neighbours being unaware of who or what Figwit was, my ethnographic analysis also shows that online practices also impact on people’s offline worlds, as is evidenced by the core Figwit members meeting one another in person. However, insofar as online practices influence offline situations, my ethnography shows that online communities are difficult to sustain due to the geographic distance and cost of travel. However, the creators’ shared intellectual middle-class imaginaries and dispositions, which are generated from their educational, family and vocational habitus, and which were expressed in their deployment of irony and their technical website expertise, significantly impacted upon their online activities and interactivity.

In this chapter I have shown how Figwit's creators' interactions began as a series of disparate, individualised fan practices and eventually matured into a distinct online community through Iris, Jen, Sherry and Tanya's online social engagements. The formation of Figwit also shows how online interactivity can be easily constructed around very precise and focused interests. Yet, more significantly, it shows how a group of transnationally separated individuals can actively engage in these interests. In the following chapter I will explain why these women were motivated to create a parody of elf fandom by constructing a bit-part movie extra as a worthy celebrity. The production and consumption of Figwit goes to the heart of post-industrial society and its relationship to Hollywood celebrity.

CHAPTER THREE: The formation of an online celebrity

Introduction

In Chapter Two I established that the online Figwit community emerged from the individual motivations and autonomous movie-watching experience of several casual LOTR fans. Through their independent, yet ultimately collusive, navigation and negotiation of the online TORn website, the women's parody of the 'swooning, drooling' adulatory message boards quickly evolved into a socially coherent and highly distinctive community centred on the in-joke of Figwit. Through these women's online TORn activities I demonstrated that their socio-technical interactivity was motivated by both offline and online social processes and furthermore how the internet enabled transnational and socially discrete communication pathways to be easily formed between like-minded individuals.

Figwit can be understood as a shared symbol amongst a group of online TORn members. The focus of this chapter is to understand the core symbolism of Figwit and its relation to post-industrial celebrity. As Figwit was an intentional parody, his creation therefore reveals key narratives and ideals that inform post-industrial celebrity. The online formation of the Figwit parody further illustrates the transnational and shared nature of contemporary celebrity in both its narrative ideals and practice.

In this chapter I analyse contemporary celebrity, focusing on the ideals manifested in these praiseworthy individuals. By presenting a definition of celebrity, and then historically contextualising its purpose, I show how celebrity has been, and still remains, a marker of social good. As the focus of my analysis is post-industrial notions of the celebrity, I critically investigate what constitutes social good in post-industrial society and how these ideals are embodied in today's celebrities. I discuss the concept of ideal reflexive individualism, and its influence within contemporary notions of personhood

and subjectivity formation. Fundamentally, this is a theoretical discussion about the institutionalisation of individualism (Beck 1994; 2002; Giddens 1991, 1994) and the ideal dispositions that are generated by this (Howland 2007). I argue that this changing nature of self informs contemporary celebrity praxis, where adulated individuals are perceived to embody ideal reflexive individual traits. Furthermore, I argue an amalgam of ideal reflexive individual narratives and celebrity praxis informs both the online and offline activities of Figwit's creators. This is clearly evident from their initial adulatory, female movie fan gaze of Jackson's movie, and in their consequent online participation on TORn, and finally in their development of the elf parody and the offline celebrity they attribute to Bret McKenzie.

In this chapter the production and consumption of Figwit opens the space to consider contemporary constructions of celebrity, in both its highly-rationalised industry-sanctioned Hollywood star system, and also the consumer/fan generated expressions, as exemplified by TORn and more specifically Figwit. Thus I also discuss the highly commercialised and commodified nature of contemporary celebrity (Gamson 1994; Rojek 2000; Turner 2004) that significantly influences these ideal identity constructions. Consequently, I argue that these commercial interests generate emulative and adulatory fan practices, which are partly fulfilled through the consumption of celebrity endorsed products and movie merchandise, and the desire for social proximity with celebrities (Ferris 2001). In my analysis of Figwit I argue that the production and consumption of the parody elf is clearly informed by contemporary celebrity narratives, especially as Figwit emerged out of prior Tolkien fan practices, which reproduce typical contemporary manifestations of fandom that also generate and affirm the ideals of modern celebrity (Dyer 1979; Gamson 1994; Turner 2004).

In addition, my analysis of the women's activities focuses on how the emulative and aspirational dimensions of contemporary celebrity ideals and practices are incorporated into people's subjective and intersubjective engagements, and also examines the degree to which ideal reflexive individual

dispositions are transnationally coherent and embedded in these activities. Through the creation and consequential consumption of Figwit the highly dynamic, complex and transnationally shared dialogic of offline and online social worlds is again evident, and is particularly apparent when celebrity industry and fan interests converge. This was demonstrated in the cameo appearance of Figwit actor, Bret McKenzie in the final instalment of Jackson's trilogy, who was invited to play a speaking role by the movie producers in response to the online and media attention directed toward the creation of Figwit. I argue that the recognition and constructive acknowledgement that Figwit received from the movie producers illustrates the significance of his creation as a parody of celebrity.

Defining Celebrity

In terms of post-industrial celebrity, or even historical forms of celebrity there are few, if any, definitive interpretations. However, several studies have sought to situate celebrity with existing theoretical frameworks. For example, Hughes-Freeland considers contemporary celebrity's institutional evolution and deployment as charisma in modern political systems in Indonesia (2007 – see also Marshall 1997). Others consider how celebrity is constructed through and generated by the mass media (Turner 2004); while Rojek (2001) argues that celebrity is form of secular religion focused on the idealised meritocracy and the associated institutionalisation of individualisation within industrial societies. Drawing on these studies, and others that consider the wider historical, political and social relevance of celebrity as an identity in pre-20th century (Braudy 1986; Rollins 1983), celebrities can be defined as “personalities that are given heightened cultural significance within the social world” (Marshall 1997: 57).

Considering the pre-eminence of celebrities, and their elevated status, what is it about these individuals and their actions that differentiates them from ordinary people or non-celebrity? Boorstin's (1964) key work on celebrity

aligns 20th century celebrities with the notion of hero, while Strate (1991), whose thesis on celebrity biographies focuses on the role of admirers and more significantly on the specific influence of society in determining what is admired in celebrity personalities:

any human figure who is the object of worship, admiration, adulation, and/or imitation. To the extent that an evil or insignificant individual is the object of such sentiments, that individual is a hero. Therefore, who is or is not a hero is defined by admirers and societies, not by any particular standards. (Strate 1991: 5)

Fundamentally Strate's concept of celebrity, much like Marshall's (1997), alerts us to how the recognition of high status individuals is embedded within wider social and cultural milieus, and is pertinent to the argument of this chapter. Here I investigate what values, ideals, narratives and practices of post-industrial society are attributed to individuals who are considered celebrities. I also examine the motivations of admirers, who generate and perpetuate celebrity. Such contextualisation of the wider societal ideals, practices and narratives is essential to my analysis of Figwit. As a parody of contemporary celebrity, the meanings and symbols presented in Figwit were a manipulation of existing celebrity narratives by his creators, and therefore reveal people's intimate relationships with contemporary post-industrial celebrity narratives. Furthermore, Marshall and Strate's conceptualisations clearly frame celebrity as an individual person, rather than a corporate group, sports team, band, orchestra or an entire movie cast. Although individuals from such collectives are often framed as contemporary celebrities, this is because of their seemingly unique, singular talents and distinctive contributions to their corporate groups. Therefore, in the first instance I argue that contemporary celebrity is premised on the recognition and adulation of individual achievement, and furthermore that this significantly arises from notions of ideal reflexive individualism that are prevalent in post-industrial societies.

Another aspect of celebrity to consider is the proximity between the celebrity and admirer. Rojek observes that it is:

the only cluster of human relationships in which mutual passion typically operates without physical interaction (2001: 48).

The absence of contact between the adulated celebrity and their admirers is primarily due to the mediated nature of the relationship (e.g. via magazines, television, films, coins²⁴ etc) (Braudy 1986 ; Ferris 2001; Gamson 1994; Rojek 2001). Furthermore, this lack of social proximity is potentially replicated by the collective of individual admirers who also do not necessarily have face-to-face contact with one other and are thus likely to be unknown to one another, yet who in conjunction with the media and other fora (e.g. mass events such as rock concerts) collusively attribute high status to various celebrities. Mediums of mass or transnational communication pathways (e.g. international news media, internet etc) both generate celebrity by celebrating or focusing on the endeavours of specific individuals and then relaying such narratives to multitudes of subscribers, and in doing so also create and maintain the social distance between celebrities and their admirers (Braudy 1986; Ferris 2001; Marshall 1997; Rojek 2001). Therefore, any consideration of contemporary celebrity needs to consider the various mechanisms, including the collusiveness of friendships and fan groups (both web-based and face-to-face), through which admirers construct and share celebrity. For example, during the initial creation, authoring, and mock 'swooning and drooling' fandom of Figwit there was no geographic connections or social interaction between the admirers and their celebrated parody elf. In fact, during the initial discussions about Figwit, the identity of the actor playing the extra was inconsequential to the women's exclusively TORN-based activities:

I remember someone on the board said "Well I wonder if the guy who plays Figwit knows about it?" And I said "No, why should he?" He's just an extra, he's not that involved (Iris, documentary interview)

²⁴ Braudy argues that celebrity and prestige in the Roman Antiquity was communicated through the minting of new coins, where Roman emperors, whose busts appeared on the coins were the highly ranked and recognised individuals of the era (1986: 123).

However, this changed when the women met Bret McKenzie and each other. In this circumstance not only was their prior geographic and social distance from Figwit collapsed, but the women's previously web-based interactivity was transformed into face-to-face interactions as they all socialised together over a period of days while Bret's comedy act, Flight of the Conchords, performed in the 2002 Edinburgh Fringe Festival in Scotland. In this respect, my analysis of Figwit and attendant celebrity narratives considers how shared notions of celebrity were disseminated and agreed upon by the women through their symbolic constructs of Figwit. My analysis also focuses on how a shared notion of celebrity that is common to these women and also to the larger group of 'swooning, drooling' TORn fans, and more broadly people in post-industrial societies.

History of Celebrity – a marker of social good

In my historical analysis I examine the socio-cultural narratives and practices that have informed various constructions and consumptions of celebrity. I also look at how some values have endured over time especially where celebrity constructs, despite immense transformations in social, economic and political structures, have retained a similar function of validating and reproducing elevated social status and the consequential hierarchisation of societies. Furthermore, the construction of celebrity has hegemonically cast the on-going reproduction of social stratification as a public good (Brady 1986). I also discuss how celebrity status is derived from the seemingly ideal actions of esteemed individuals and substantiate my definition of celebrity by examining what actions and social roles are aligned with celebrity identity. I illustrate that celebrity identification is mass recognition, admiration, and adulation of individuals' dominant positions within existing social structures and hierarchies.

From the 15th century onwards various royal or aristocratic individuals, and elected political officials, represented privilege and authority throughout

Europe, and were accordingly afforded high status and recognition (Strong 2003: 84-7). The elevated status of many of these individual 'personalities' was mostly based on their visible and comparatively considerable amounts of inherited wealth. In 18th Century, the rise of mercantile wealth meant that these aspects were not however exclusive to the aristocracy (Rojek 2001).

Many of the elite performatively displayed their elevated status through their practices of conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1925), and especially through their leisure practices, novel material possessions and their ownership of land. Furthermore, the recognition of these individuals and their high status was also evident in specific rituals that symbolised existing structures of power and authority (Bloch 1987). In many respects the social order, hierarchies and the attribution of elite status of pre-industrial European societies were more rigid and incontestable in comparison to contemporary post-industrial forms (Rojek 2001: 28), which are generated through highly individualised, meritocratic reward mechanisms (Beck 2002) and an inculcated sense of progressive improvement in pursuit of constant economic growth (Gellner 1983).

Nevertheless, individual achievement within socially ascribed or allocated offices (e.g. Royal title etc) was noted and celebrated, especially when individuals fulfilled the obligations and responsibilities of their office in a satisfactory manner. It was also celebrated when individuals surpassed normative expectations, such as displaying exemplary military prowess or financial and political acumen (Braudy 1986). However, with the 15th Renaissance and the emergence of mercantile market and class-based societies, which fundamentally collapsed prior fixed social orders and hierarchies, increasing emphasis was placed on individual achievement or merit as a means to acquire social acclaim. Rojek notes that this was especially notable in 15th century artistic avenues:

the international fame acquired by Dante, Michelangelo, Leonardo daVinci and Shakespeare was not a matter of birth, but by accomplishment. (2001: 28)

Though these sites of celebrity or social acclaim differ markedly from contemporary examples, such as Hollywood actors, sportspeople and musicians, historic forms of high status individuals or celebrities consistently embody the status quo and thereby hegemonically affirm and validate existent social orders, structures of stratification and hierarchisation, and the mechanisms by which elevated social position may be acquired, deployed and rewarded. Furthermore, in accepting or celebrating individuals as celebrity, those without high social status or acclaim essentially validate the mechanisms and orders of social status elevation and consequential stratification, thereby tacitly accepting their own lowly status, domination and circumscribed access to resources and rewards. For example, the absence of notable women in Rojek's comment above attests to the stark gender stratifications of the time. Thus creation and attribution of elevated, prestigious individuals recreates the dialogic structures of domination and subordination within any stratified society, which through celebrity practices and narratives are expressed and affirmed *en masse* (Marshall 1997: 7)

Contemporary Celebrity – the merit of social good

Although high status in post-industrial societies is still attributed to individuals who have inherited wealth (e.g. the Rockefeller family), political office (e.g. British royalty), or social status (e.g. sons and daughters of movie or rock stars), hegemonic and social structures are increasingly focused on individual endeavour and associated structures of meritocracy (Beck 2002) as the means to achieve celebrity status.

This is reflected in the wide array of occupational, sporting, artistic, and political realms that “achieved celebrity” (Rojek 2001: 17-20) is generated within, rather than the previously fixed or incontestable sites of high social status that essentially represented “ascribed forms of power” (Rojek 2001: 29). For example, the rise of democratic political systems has underscored notions of individual effort in the attainment of high political office and power

(Marshall 1997: 242). And the emergence of class, market-based societies has privileged the individual acquisition and deployment of economic, social, and cultural capitals as means to achieving social distinction, social mobility and stratified status in everything from occupational to educational, consumerist, and social fields of action (Bourdieu 1984; Gellner 1983; Beck 2002). However, high status is still significantly expressed in the practices of conspicuous consumption, namely in the richly leisured and material opulence typically available to celebrities (Gamson 1994; Gledhill 1991). It is these differences that are the focus of this chapter, which is how the production and consumption of Figwit illuminates the ways that contemporary celebrity formation that are shaped by the pervasive expectations of individualised meritocracy, ideal reflexive individualism and the commercialised interests behind the ‘entertaining/performance’ industries.

Ethnography of celebrity parody

I was interested in what qualities the women had imbued upon their parody character, which referenced mainstream celebrity ideals, when they first conversed on TORn. Iris had kindly provided some transcripts of her and Sherry’s original message posts, which helped contextualise what she had told me in our interviews about Figwit’s early days:

His body was covered with the robe so that left us with the face- his features and expressions. I don't think he ever really pouted, though. I think Sherry came up with that one and it stuck. He does seem regal (I'm guessing those were instructions from the director) but the whole pouty/broody/smoldering [sic] thing was made up by us - it wasn't really part of his (Bret's) performance. We made a Tall, Dark and Handsome character out of him. (Iris, email interview)

What is interesting is that despite having little material about the elf extra, InDUHvidual and ArwenElf’s construction of this elf extra conformed to conventional narratives of the female fan gaze. Without so much as an image of their ‘star’ they had managed to assign him attributes more commonly reserved for genuine celebrities (e.g. physical beauty, dark, brooding,

enigmatic). For example, the following poems on the FigwitLives website illustrates the tone and attributes routinely ascribed to Figwit:

Though Figwit the elf never spoke
His silence great passions evoked.
Stupendous and broody
Hypnotic and moody
His beauty leaves some of us soaked.
(limerick by Roheryn courtesy of www.figwitlives.net)

The mysterious Figwit is cute,
And I bet that he knows how to shoot.
He's gorgeous and brave,
And handsome and grave,
And he probably likes the Entmoot
(limerick by Shadowfaxrules courtesy of www.figwitlives.net)

The women also made characters out of themselves by parodying existing fan practices. For example, when I saw InDUHvidual's post in reaction to the sourcing of Figwit's first image, to me it epitomised the excitement of a genuine fan:

OHMYGODohmygodohmygodOHMYGODohmygodohmygodohmygodOHM
YGOdohmygodohmygodOHMYGOD

ohmygodohmygodohmygodohmygodohmygod
ohmygodohmygodohmygodohmygodohmygod
ohmygodohmygodohmygodohmygodohmygod
YES!!!!!!!!!!!!!! IT'S HIMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM!
purdy Figwit,my sweet,my precioussssssssssss.
How did you find it oh master yig [poster who found the image], most
beloved
of all posters?
ohmygodohmygodohmygodohmygodohmygod
ohmygodohmygodohmygodohmygodohmygod
ohmygodohmygodohmygodohmygodohmygod
(Iris/InDUHvidual, TORn message board, 14 February 2002)

Consequently, InDUHvidual's message footer used an image (see fig.1) that was obtained from a CD booklet that contained a photo of the Council of Elrond movie scene with the accompanying caption: "Figwit Lives", which ironically references the "Frodo Lives" slogan that had been a popular

catchery during the 1960s popularisation of LOTR novel (Roszak 1970: 40). The use of the image also reproduced existing TORn fan practices whereby users embed similar images of main characters/actors in their message footers.

Reflexive individualism and ideal celebrities

In this section I background the concept of reflexive individualism, which in many post-industrial or ‘first-world’ societies has emerged from historical changes in the structures of economics, such as the increasing mobility of labour and capital (Beck 2002; Gellner 1983); which in turn lead to intensely individualised and reflexive social and cultural contexts (Beck 1994, 2002; Giddens 1991, 1994; Lash 1994). Furthermore, the institutions of education, employment, occupation, consumerism and governmental regulation and provisioning (Beck 2002) have increasingly individualised life experiences in post-industrial society, where reflexive individualism is now a widespread habitus especially amongst the middle classes (Sweetman 2003). I will also explain how the institutionalisation of individualism and the habitus of reflexive individualism generate ideal dispositions (Howland 2007), which I argue are typically perceived to be manifested in contemporary celebrities.

It has been observed that the mobile nature of labour and capital, and the individualisation of post-industrial societies, has displaced previously fixed notions of hierarchy and privilege (Geller 1983; Giddens 1991). Thus upward and downward social mobility is increasingly premised on the individual acquisition or loss of economic, social or cultural capitals (Beck 2002: 2; Gellner: 11), which comparatively promote the ideals of “freedom, choice, flexibility and satisfaction” (Rojek 1995: 1) across all sectors of society where progressive improvement of individual status and reward are ideally attainable to all. Consequently, status and privilege in post-industrial society rely less on birth, marriage or divinely sanctioned elite status, in favour of individual meritocracy, choice and effort. Gellner (1983) suggests that these conditions and attendant mobility of industrialised society generates an

egalitarian ethos in which all individuals aspire to attain meritorious recognition and to be given equal opportunities for individual advancement. This is not to say that social stratification and variable life chance consequences for individuals are collapsed, rather they are perceived to be increasingly individually generated and negotiated (Beck 2002). Beck cites ubiquitous encounters of post-industrial life, such as state, bureaucratic and commercial institutions as inherently individually negotiated and administrated (1994: 15), and are principally geared toward structuring and collectively recognising people as individuals (2002). Thus post-industrial conditions favour or compel individual intentionality, requiring people to respond to a variety of social phenomena in self-oriented and self-referential ways.

The implication of these highly individualised contexts, where people have to manage their own lives, means that the structures of power and stratification are often obscured. In fact, ideologically casting the individual as the architect of their own destiny ensures that failure is essentially personalised. “Your own life – your own failure”²⁵ (Beck 2002: 24). Furthermore individuals are drawn toward fields of action where they perceive the greatest opportunities for self-expression and autonomous practice. For example, in the realms of post-industrial consumerism (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Miller 1995; Rojek 1995), intimate social relationships (Giddens 1991; Howland 2007), the formation of ‘communities of interest’ (Beck 2002; Lash 1994), and in the structures and uses of contemporary communication pathways such as the internet (Baym 2000; Constable 2003; Hine 2000; Miller and Slater 2000). Yet even in such settings that appear to enable self-assembled and consciously mediated practices of personal identity formation, social distinction and self-oriented praxis, reward and failure are still cast as the responsibility of the individual. Thus, individuals are consistently compelled to construct their own destinies or life journeys to the extent that they are the

²⁵ Moreover social problems are further perceived “in terms of psychological dispositions: as personal inadequacies, guilt feelings, anxieties, conflicts, and neuroses” (Beck 2002: 39 – see also Giddens 1991).

actor, designer, juggler, and stage director of his or her own biography, identity, social networks, commitments and convictions. (Beck 1994: 14)

Subjective and intersubjective expressions in post-industrialist societies demonstrate a high degree of “(auto)biographical awareness” (Howland 2007: np) or what Beck calls the compulsion for “living one’s own life” (Beck 2002: 26). So while people still affiliate with, and meaningfully engage in, corporate groups such as families, extended kin networks, or other social groupings such as online fan communities, these are individually conceptualised and constructed interactivities where people are repeatedly encouraged to *choose* to assert and enact such social ties. Lash contends “we reflexively ‘throw ourselves’ into the communal world ...we *decide to be become involved* in them, or even with others come to have hand in *creating* them” (Lash 1994: 147 emphasis added). As such, peoples’ apparently autonomously selected lifestyles and their reflexive responses generate a seemingly limitless number of personalised narratives and contexts, which is an inescapable condition of late modernity where people are persistently compelled by the individuating structures to respond in this manner (Beck 2002: 35).

Transnational reflexive individual education

The transnational and compulsive nature of reflexive individualism is clearly evident in post-industrial formal education curricula, which actively and explicitly instils a sense of individualism and reflexive orientation in pupils from childhood to adolescence. For example, formal education approaches in the nation-states that the Figwit creators studied in (England, United States, Israel) all state that individual economic and technological proficiency; self-worth and esteem, reflexive analysis and/or critical awareness are key outcomes for students. Additionally, all these curricula unequivocally declare that the purpose of formal education is to prepare individuals for lifelong learning and employment, which are part of the individualising conditions of industrial capitalist societies (Gellner 1983).

The *National Curriculum for England* states that education is for the "*well-being of the individual* aiming to instil pupils with a sense of *self-esteem and value in oneself* (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority n.d. – emphasis added). The Curriculum also clearly views consumption practices as an essential component of education, where the *Values, Aims and Purposes* clearly sets out:

to equip pupils as consumers to make informed judgements and independent decisions and to understand their responsibilities and rights. (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority n.d.)

Bourdieu (1984) recognises that formal education is an essential component in the way society reproduces its traditions, values, structures and hierarchies. More than this, education inculcates social and cultural values, which in addition to family background, occupations, and other life trajectories aspects, plays a fundamental role in habitus formation (Bourdieu in Jenkins: 136). What this extract shows is that modern educational practice actively supports the ideals that contribute an awareness of their individual rights and responsibilities.

Furthermore, educational institutions within the United States also engender similar pedagogical approaches. For example, the Virginia Educational Department believes that for K12 students (i.e. kindergarten to end of high school) to be a competent actor in this society they must develop:

critical reasoning including problem solving and decision making; proficiency in the use of computers and related technology; and the skills to manage personal finances and to make sound financial decisions. (Cannaday 2007.)

Arguably by instilling the necessary skills that develop students' own knowledge and familiarity in these areas, education pedagogy endorses the technologies and institutions that are individually-negotiated – career, academic achievement, online engagements, intimate relationships and so on.

The OMETZ Programme in Israel also endorses similar values associated with a stratified meritocracy, and ideal dispositions of reflexive individualism. In fact OMETZ is a Hebrew acronym for “I believe in myself, I’m ready to make the effort, I expect to achieve” (Bar et al. 2004: 36), which explicitly illustrates how reflexive ideals are being delivered through formal education. Even in United States’ tertiary education, students are encouraged to “develop a good understanding and appreciation of themselves... [as well as] reasoned independence in thought and action” (University of Puget Sound n.d.).²⁶

These examples show that, despite cross-cultural variation, the pedagogy of formalised education seeks to inculcate students with similar ideals and practices of reflexively individuality. Formal education in a wide variety of post-industrial societies affirms reflexive individualism both as a narrative and practice in people’s subjectivity formation. Furthermore, these examples also indicate that individual Figwit creators were also likely to have been subjected to the inculcation of similar values in their formal education, which consequently inform the women’s reflexively-oriented online activities.

Reflexive habitus

Sweetman identifies an emergent reflexive habitus or habitual reflexivity that is “a characteristic of certain forms of contemporary habitus” (2003: 537) growing out of the structural individualisation and reflexivity of post-industrial society. Bourdieu’s notion of habitus argues that individuals’ social practices are an accumulation of one’s learnt social experience from birth; emphasising that habitus is the unconscious or seemingly innate embodiment of social structures (1984: 467). Bourdieu further contends that habitus generates subconscious, resilient, and exchangeable dispositions. These dispositions are expressed through the dynamic utilisation of different capitals – economic, social, cultural and symbolic – that individuals acquire and dynamically deploy in various fields of action throughout their lifetimes. For example, the Figwit creators’ playful use of parody reflects their intellectual middle class habitus (Bourdieu 1984), which was significantly

²⁶ I cite UPS because one of my key informants, Jen, received her undergraduate degree from this institution.

developed in their tertiary educational and family backgrounds (see Chapter Tow). Habitus thus actively produces and reflects the embodiment of social structures, groups and distinctions which are generated through an individual's upbringing, education and vocation. It also includes:

the most automatic gestures or the apparently most insignificant techniques of the body – ways of walking or blowing ones' nose, ways of eating or talking... engage the most fundamental principles of construction and evaluation of the social world. (Bourdieu 1984: 466)

Bourdieu's thesis specifically focuses on the reproduction of social distinction within advanced capitalist societies, where habitus symbolically communicates, in comparison and totality, who we are and where we fit within the social groups and hierarchies.

Although reflexivity and individualism are pervasive aspects of post-industrial social and cultural ways of life, Sweetman observes that not all individuals are equally inclined or able to be reflexive. This is because not all individuals' occupational, consumption, social connectedness, and lifestyles promote or encourage persistent reflexivity (2003: 537 – 542). Thus individuals' class experiences and other habitus-determined practices undoubtedly influence their reflexive praxis. For example, Howland (2004) notes that the middle classes in New Zealand are inclined to be reflexive individuals as this disposition typically informs and is valued within, their educational, occupation, consumerist and family milieus. Thus the middle-classes actively engage self-awareness strategies (e.g. consulting self-help books) and routinely articulate self-inscribed identities.

Although the habitus of reflexive individualism is always mediated through other habitus (e.g. ethnicity, gender, social distinction), it nevertheless generates a set of generalised ideal dispositions that individuals may act upon, narrate, or performatively display (Howland 2007). These ideals include claiming to be, and being socially affirmed, as an unique individual who is also autonomous in thought and action. Other ideal dispositions include being personally committed to self-improvement, actively positioning

the self in relation to various socio-cultural narratives (e.g. scientific knowledge; religious beliefs etc) and intentionally forming rewarding social relationships. Further, the ideal reflexive individual should also be adaptable and creative in the face of constant change and should actively maintain valued appearance and body aesthetics (Howland 2007). In essence the ideal reflexive individual seeks to create, perform and narrate the self as coherent and praiseworthy (Howland 2004: 110).

Ideal reflexivity individuals: stick with what you are good at

Rather than abandoning unattainable narratives or critically assessing the structural conditions of failure, subjective coherence and self-narratives of praiseworthiness in post-industrial subjectivity means that in the face of abject failure one's situation can be understood as an opportunity for personal growth, or a learning curve in reaching ideals (Beck 2002). Thus the failure is not perceived to be an outcome of structural conditions, but rather reflects an individual's inability to reflexively justify and legitimise personal circumstances that maintain the ideal.

This means that in actual or ideal terms individuals reflexively conceptualise and negotiate their vocation, education, residence, diets, appearance and even intimate relationships. For example Giddens identifies that contemporary politics has taken the form of life politics where people's political motivations are reflexively oriented (1991:243) through single-issue focused campaigns, petitions, and interest groups, as peoples' experiences of the world are mediated through this reflexive subjectivity and intersubjectivity towards areas where they can assert the most control. In fact ideal reflexive individuality is often thwarted in many post-industrial settings (e.g. occupational, domestic etc) and individuals are therefore drawn to fields of action where they perceive the greatest capacity for personal autonomy and choice. Such field include consumption, social connectedness, occupation pathways, lifestyle practices and in the construction of autobiographical narratives that assert coherent and progressive reflexive individuality (Beck 2002). For example, rather than abandoning the ideals of reflexive individualism, people become experts in expressing themselves through

reflexive consumption practices (Rojek 1995; Sweetman 2003) and expressions of personal taste often become the medium for constructing social relations (Miller 1995: 154). This is evident in my ethnographic data where some of the Figwit team were highly aware of how they were perceived through their online practices and intentionally made provisions for this in their online biographies, which then prompted like-minded others to enter into dialogue with them and form evolving online/ offline social connections (see Chapter Two).

Therefore, ideal reflexive individualism more closely relates to an individual's capacity, or at least their personally perceived capacity, to intentionally create, plan and have control over their lives through the means they have available to them. Reflexive individualism requires people to actively and consciously assemble their place in the world:

For modern social advantages *one has to do something*, to make an active effort. One has to win, know how to assert oneself in the competition for limited resources – and not only once, but day after day. (Beck: 3 emphasis added)

Hence the emphasis placed on individual merit and performance as a social measure of success in post-industrial societies. Therefore it is unsurprising that sportspeople and actors are cast as celebrities: as their bodily actions and personal talents are routinely framed embodiments of reflexive individuality. Furthermore they are cast as unique, autonomous individuals who are purposively directed toward achieving particular performance goals. Thus David Beckham's drilling and accurate cross of a soccer ball, or Jessica Alba's radiating smile in movies and paparazzi shots, are not only regarded as extraordinary but are directly attributed to their reflexive intentionality. Thus celebrities are rewarded – through various commercial relationships – with riches that endow them with material leisure far beyond the reach of ordinary people. In the following section I discuss how this is clearly manifested in the ideal reflexive dispositions of contemporary celebrities, who are markers of social good in post-industrial society.

Ideal reflexive celebrities

Ideal reflexive individualism is relevant to this thesis because these are the social values that contemporary Western celebrities are seen to affirm and embody. Having argued that celebrity individuals are indicative of the hegemonic status quo, I also explain how celebrities are perceived and constructed as ideal reflexive individuals. With regards to the formation of the online Figwit community, the attributes characteristically adulated and emulated in contemporary celebrity provided the ironic fodder for the creation of the elf parody. However in this section I examine how ideal reflexive individualism is reproduced within contemporary celebrity, using Figwit as an illustrative example. In the following section I assess how the women's authoring of Figwit subverts, yet simultaneously highlights, contemporary celebrity ideals.

Consistent with the egalitarian ideals of individualised meritocracy, modern celebrities are often cast by star-making medias, and widely perceived to be, manifest examples of successful reflexive individuals. Appearing in various forms, celebrity are individuals who are routinely adulated and admired as living proof that ideal reflexive individualism can be a lived practice. Marshall states that:

The celebrities articulate agency and activity in democratic culture. In their often "unique" - or perhaps idiosyncratic - personalities and in their attempts to achieve autonomous status, one can see the work of active human agency. The celebrity, then, is the public representation of individuality in contemporary culture, where their movement and personality transformations are significant. (1997: 242)

Therefore celebrities are effectively the prototype of ideal personhood in contemporary Western society. They are an embodiment of the exalted self (Howland 2004: 110), where the individual is acknowledged, affirmed and rewarded for essentially being an intentional, autonomous person. Epitomising the principles of self-meritocracy, celebrities appear to affirm that individual endeavour, recognition and goal achievement can be natural and effortless. In fact contemporary celebrity concentrates on, and idealises, the individual and intentional expressions of personal creativity, talents,

skills, knowledge, experience, and/or bodily aesthetics, which are variously evident in such fields of action as sport, acting or singing. Moreover, these highly individualised endeavours, where the efforts of particular individuals are recognised, adulated and rewarded, often starkly contrast with more ordinary occupations that are often routine, repetitive and mundane. Furthermore, due to the often corporate nature of ordinary employment, one's individual efforts can go unrecognised and personal achievements can also be corporatised.

Thus Hollywood, sporting and other contemporary celebrities are cast and perceived as manifest examples of ideal reflexive individuality. Celebrities are commonly cast, and biographised as individuals who possess a unique configuration and suite of skills, bodily aesthetic and talent that cannot be replicated by any other individual. In this way celebrities are socially validated as unique, moreover that such unique personhood is seamlessly achieved and embodied. Furthermore, such unique persons are justly accorded rewards based on their individual efforts and innate talents recognised. In addition, their uniqueness and personal intentionality is also evident in the stage, pen or nicknames that various actors, musicians, athletes and authors deploy. In this respect the choice of a unique 'stage name' asserts the construction of a distinctive, exclusive celebrity persona that is distanced from generational, familial and ordinary associations of their given birth name, and is purely associated with the individual's admired abilities and attributes. For example, in naming Figwit, Iris explained that the acronym, "Frodo is Grea...Who Is That?!?" was a direct reference to her first glimpse of the elf extra in the film

It is an accurate description of what happened in the scene in the theatre when I saw the movie.(Iris, documentary interview)

Moreover, Iris clearly articulated the difference between their fictional celebrity and Bret McKenzie, the actor who played him:

So, okay you can't take Figwit away from the humour...Figwit is the character with the humour and Bret is something different, he is an actor and a nice guy (Iris, documentary interview)

Both Sherry and Iris' documentary interview made it clear that Figwit was inseparable from their humorous construct, clearly demonstrating that the elf extra name parodied stereotypical movie-actor celebrity talents and attributes. Iris' comment also reveals, however, that she believed that Bret nevertheless also reflected similar celebrity ideals.

Contemporary celebrities are also presented as aesthetically ideal in bodily and physical appearance. Ideally, these attractive celebrity representations appear natural and effortless, and unique to the particular individual, which is clearly evident in Figwit:

Bret actually looked a little elvish (elven?) according to fantasy lore - slim but wiry, refined and delicate features, high cheekbones, somewhat androgynous. Legolas was the same way (and better because his makeup/wig were also better). (Iris, email interview)

Although ideal physical aesthetics are socially mediated, achievement of such ideals is often perceived to signify that an individual has autonomy and control over their body and appearance, which is also an ideal disposition of reflexive individualism. In fact the increasing popularisation of cosmetic surgery, and of diet and fitness regimes, is underscored by collective discourses that not only attempt to establish ideal body forms and appearances, but which also significantly cast reflexive control over one's personal appearance as a moral imperative (Giddens 1991).

Post-industrial celebrities are also believed to frequently assert intentional, judicious and autonomous decision-making in career and life choices, and are visibly rewarded for these. For example, the Hollywood actors who often wait for the 'right' script or the 'role of a lifetime' are publicly validated for what appears to be their self-determined work and creativity choices. Similarly, sportspeople who change clubs or sporting codes, are cast as individuals who, like actors can make decisions on the basis of individual passions or the personal desire for new challenges or higher performances. Thus celebrities

seemingly appear as ideal reflexive individuals who are unencumbered by the economic and social constraints of work, family and society.

Furthermore, celebrities are also constructed so that they appear to be effortless in their success. This was another quality attributed to Figwit, where his ‘talent’ was noticed for, ostensibly, doing nothing:

I don’t think he really has to do much more than that. The smouldering, enigmatic look does pretty well on its own. (Jen, documentary interview)

The embodiment of Figwit is cast as worthy in itself of meritorious reward: recognition was due chiefly because of his physical appearance, although as the parody highlights recognition of one ideal attribute is often the catalyst for the ascription of many more idealised characteristics (e.g. Figwit’s silence indicated he was powerful, he was pacifist etc).

The following aspects of ideal reflexive individualism that are commonly manifested in contemporary celebrity are not expressly present in Figwit. Nevertheless, these points are relevant to my argument as they further illuminate the ideals that are credited to celebrities and which inform emulative and adulatory fan practices. For example, the adulatory discourses surrounding celebrities often lack references to the structural uncertainty and variability of individual employment, romantic or educational endeavours. In this respect, change is often presented as resulting from the individual intent of the celebrity or as an opportunity for their personal growth experience. Where this is not possible, and celebrity individuals are publicly battling addiction, disease or relationship break-ups, these are often cast as either temporary set-backs or as salutary morality tales about the consequences of losing self-control (e.g. Paris Hilton’s recent driving conviction, jail sentence and consequential moral epiphany that she would dedicate her life to charity works – (Margaret 2007) Where these set-backs are longer term, individuals who display coherence or are reflective of their circumstances nevertheless still demonstrate ideal autobiographical awareness (e.g. Michael J. Fox’s ‘courageous’ battle with Parkinson’s disease – (Richmond 2000)

In addition, the high status accorded to celebrities and the perception of their ideal traits can also result in their attributes transferring across careers. Local sportspeople, such as former All Black Marc Ellis, demonstrate the ability to be progressively successful across a number of fields – for example, former All Black and Rugby League player success in sport, in hosting television shows and in owning an orange juice company. Ellis' success visibly affirms and promotes key ideals of reflexive individualism and post-industrial society, where progressive improvement should be attained in a variety of fields of action and throughout one's life .

Finally, celebrities are often biographised and autobiographised in idealised and coherent ways, thereby contributing to a progressive life narrative. Individual's past, present and future activities are often justified within narratives as intentional, positive and relevant to one's personal success. For example, the long and successful career of über-celebrity Madonna, where her appearance (e.g. hair styles), fashions (e.g. wearing the 'famous' pointy Gaultier bra, but now wear adidas tracksuits), and even aspects of her spiritual (e.g. Catholicism to Buddhism to Kabbalah), recreational and personal interests have constantly and progressively evolved over the decades. The purposely-crafted and intentional nature of this persona incorporates her past controversies and indiscretions in a manner that is consistent and supportive of her present endeavours. Madonna's perpetual chameleon-like image renewal highlights the praxis of ideal reflexive individuality and celebrity whereby the cultivation and presentation of one's self as a highly-visible, distinctive, progressively evolving and autonomous identity, and being accordingly rewarded for one's personal efforts.

In this respect celebrities are a modern aspiration or role models (Rojek 2001), proof that an individual can be rewarded for their unique, self-assembled narratives, practices, performances and identities over which they demonstrate maximal agency. As such the ideal reflexive individual is seemingly distanced from the structural anxieties, frustrations and

contradictions of post-industrialism. Moreover, celebrities are visibly rewarded for their seemingly autonomous decisions, physical appearance and innate talent, clearly upholding the tangible values and benefits of individual meritocracy.

A Figment of imagination: Figwit as ideal celebrity

I think that there is no doubt that if Figwit is in the film our Oscar prospects will definitely improve if he's in the film. I mean, we need to win that Best Picture and frankly we're going to do whatever is necessary to do so. And if getting Figwit into the movie is what we need to do then I think that Peter Jackson and New Line are prepared to do that.

-Mark Ordesky, Executive Producer, interviewed
in Frodo is Great...Who is That?!!

In the above quote Ordesky makes an ironic statement about Figwit that nevertheless draws attention to the manner in which this celebrity parody highlights aspects of mainstream celebrity. Insofar as Figwit was a parody of TORn fan practices, many aspects of his construct affirmed and embodied contemporary celebrity ideals. Furthermore Figwit ironically referenced attributes that are admired and aspired to within the frameworks of ideal reflexive individuality

In my analysis of the Figwit material I found that the Figwit FAQ discussion were focused on very detailed narratives of the ideal aesthetic and physical qualities attributed to Figwit, all of which reproduce those typically associated with contemporary Western celebrity:

Q: Who is the elusive Figwit?

A: Figwit is one of the elves from the council
of Elrond. He has dark hair. He has no speaking lines.

He is in a word, gorgeous.

Or another, stunning.

Or another, enigmatic.

Or another, hypnotic.

Or another, stupendous.

Or another, captivating.

Take your pick.

We go with all of the above and then some.

(Figwit FAQ, 2002)

The tone in which Figwit is described conveys the adulation that contemporary celebrities, as ideal individuals, characteristically receive. More than this, these parodies of celebrity adulation and attributions of individual talent were consistent with the 'swooning, drooling' practices that occurred in the socio-technical space that they women participated in and which focused on ideal sexually attractive bodily aesthetics of many of the LOTR movie stars. Such discourses also correspond with ideal notions of contemporary Western celebrity, which further attests to the transnational nature of celebrity and middle-class parody narratives. Furthermore, my ethnographic examples also evidence individuals' intimate and sophisticated understanding of the narratives they ironically engaged.

Other areas of the Figwit FAQ also drew attention to Figwit's aesthetic and physical attributes, which were presented as faultless, for example the following answers describe his height and weight:

Q.Height?

A. We don't know for sure but we reckon pretty tall. Well, it is our FAQ dammit! And in our handbook tall is gorgeous.

Q.Weight?

Ummm... not a lot! Have you ever seen a porky elf though?...

(Figwit FAQ, 2002)

The Figwit image constructed by his authors are intentionally consistent with the specific physical ideals, namely being slim and tall, which are commonly associated with contemporary celebrity and ideal reflexive individualism. Similarly, the following excerpt draws attention to Figwit's youthfulness, another aspect of physical appearance that is highly valued in celebrity role models:

We like to think that he is still somewhat youthful in elf years. But with a wisdom that fits perfectly with his gorgeous looks.

(Figwit FAQ, 2002)

Composing Figwit as both wise and young also reproduces attributes that are admired in Tolkien's characters, where elves are seen to be athletic, immortal and youthful. Yet, it is very seldom that both traits simultaneously found in one person or character at one time. In this respect the women's awareness of these seemingly contradictory ideals is evident in their authorship of Figwit, where they have appropriately built their fictional heart-throb to simultaneously engender many ideal celebrity narratives, which is much easier to achieve within a fictional character.

In addition to the ideal aesthetic attributes Figwit was endowed with, his creators also ascribed emotional, moral and social qualities to him; values which are commonly associated with ideal contemporary celebrity narratives:

Q: He doesn't say anything. Can he talk?

A: Well... We guess he had to say *something* during the 'argument scene' then again it is possible that he just stood there and smouldered in a silent and provoking way, his silence speaking louder than any voice there. Looking gorgeous.

(Figwit FAQ, 2002)

This depiction of Figwit, casting him as uniquely silent and judicious enough to be above any conflict, clearly constructs him as an ideal embodiment of Tolkien's elf and as a distinctive reflexive individual. More broadly, this construction of Figwit further aligns him with reflexive individual ideals that are perceived to be manifest in celebrities, specifically subjective and intersubjective awareness, and appropriately thoughtful and intentional in action. For example, Figwit, by being identified as unique from other elves and elf extras embodied one of the seemingly simple, yet core, ideals of celebrity and reflexive individualism.

In other areas of FigwitLives the celebrity and sexually attractive qualities attributed to Figwit were greatly amplified by other TORn users who contributed material to the website, but who also drew heavily upon the more

serious adulatory, ‘swooning and drooling’ female fan practices first produced on TORn:

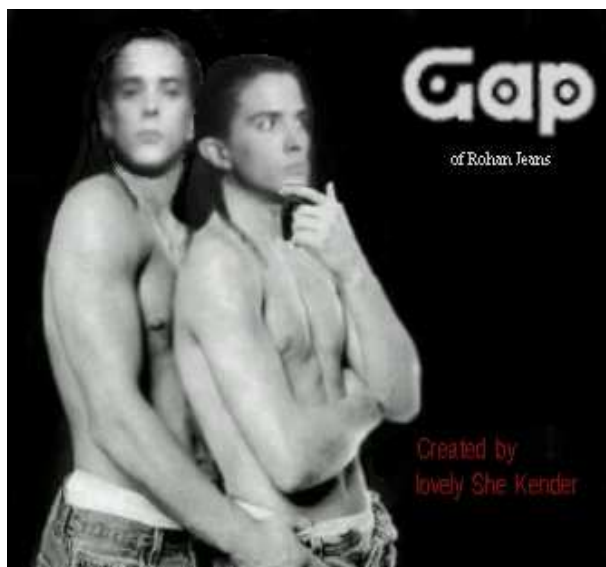


Fig. 5. Gap of Rohan fan art (Courtesy of www.figwitlives.net)

In this image a clearly pseudo-erotic, highly sexualised advertisement for GAP clothing has been altered with Figwit's face digitally replacing the original models' faces. This imagery reproduces and parodies the sexualised, 'swooning and drooling' fan practices on TORn. It also plays on LOTR-knowledge, where the Gap of Rohan was a strategically significant location in Tolkien's fictional Middle Earth.

However, parody or not, Figwit is fully personified as an ideal aesthetic representation of an elf. Moreover in various media, such the FAQ, message and Arena threads and FigwitLives website, he was also ascribed numerous qualities consistent with contemporary movie or fashion celebrities. Consequently, as examples on FigwitLives website and FAQ show, Figwit quickly became genuinely popular with fans and was received by many as a bona fide LOTR heartthrob. By making social connections and finding friends amongst others who were also participating on the 'swooning, drooling' message threads, the Figwit women engaged in a shared experience of celebrity consumption practices. In this respect Iris' online experiences

contradicted her offline life where her movie-going friends did not respond to the FOTR movie as intensely as she did. For example, Iris' online friendship with Jen was largely predicated on the fact that they both responded to FOTR in similarly enthusiastic ways and keenly shared in the parody of Figwit. For example, in her documentary interview, Jen reproduced a parody of Figwit's flawless and ideal appearance:

He always seems to have his hair perfectly in place, and his eyebrows are very well-plucked and, you know, his ears have just the right amount of point to them. And his robes are obviously flowing and graceful and there's not a thing out of place on him – so yeah grooming is clearly very important to him. (Jen, documentary interview)

Interestingly, some of Jen's observations are consistent with the qualities admired by Tolkien elf fans:

People get into elves, firstly, because obviously they are very good looking and they are very athletic. And then there's the whole immortality thing, and stamina – they also have a lot of stamina. People pick up on that. Because elves, they don't get tired easily, which is a big problem with humans. They can keep going through stuff. It's like something everyone into Tolkien would know. (Alatar, documentary interview)

Alatar's description, which subtly included the Tolkien fan sexual innuendo, shows that fictional characters do not vary greatly from the reflexive individual ideals that contemporary celebrities are perceived to exhibit. But, as the TORn 'swooning drooling' practices show, fictional characters are also adulated in a manner similar to genuine celebrities, whereby fans view fictional characters and the actors that play them as fulfilling and living ideal reflexive lives, such as being aesthetically and physically beautiful; intentionally autonomous and self-determining, and aware of autobiographic and biographic constructions, and so on. Accordingly, for the celebrity LOTR individuals – fictional or otherwise – who are perceived to embody these values, the optimal result is validation and adulation from Tolkien fans, which was clearly evident in the socio-technical environment that the Figwit team participated in and which I detailed in the previous chapter.

Thus, even as a fictional character, aspects of Figwit's movie appearance genuinely corresponded with contemporary celebrity and reflexive individuality ideals that were instantaneously and widely discernable to other people. Accordingly, Iris and her subsequent online friends, who were geographically distanced Tolkien fans, could easily identify the elf extra and then responded with a parody of adulatory activities, as evidenced by the creation of a FAQ, Figwit website, fan listing, and ancillary websites. Their shared interest and parodies of Figwit prove that ideal celebrity narratives – and by inference the ideal dispositions of reflexive individualism are transnationally pervasive and significant, especially amongst the computer savvy, tertiary educated and middle-class members of TORn. In Chapter Four I develop this argument further by examining how internet activity and interactivity intensified the ideal reflexive individuality and intellectual middle-class dispositions of Figwit's creators.

Buying fame: Commodification of contemporary celebrity

In this chapter I also examine the inherently commercial and commodified aspects of celebrity discussing how contemporary celebrity individuals are purposefully biographised to appear as aesthetically attractive, self-determining and possess diverse interests (e.g. movie star Brad Pitt's interest in architecture or former All Black, Anton Oliver's environmental and artistic interests). Further, I also discuss that these ideal representations and the accompanying merchandise are generated by the industry interests and studio publicity offices that profit from contemporary celebrity. For example Jackson's LOTR production complemented the trilogy's release with an array of limited edition figurines, posters, extended DVDs with behind-the-scenes footage that benefited from ideal celebrity constructions and representations, which were affirmed and maintained in the movie and ancillary products. Furthermore, I will explain that through the consumption of these celebrity-related products fans and non-famous individuals affirm and recognise the high social status accorded to ideal contemporary celebrities.

Returning to the ethnographic focus of this thesis, I also examine how the Figwit creators' individual gaze exemplifies celebrity adulation and therefore celebrity consumption practices. I analyse the relationship between existing Tolkien fan networks and Jackson's studio, where Jackson's well-known courting of fans (see Shefrin 2004; Thompson 2007) recognised fan-generated sites (e.g. TORn) as trusted media outlets that were given exclusive news reports. Thus the creation and consequential growth of the Figwit phenomenon clearly emphasises the nexus between commercial/industry recognition and that of reflexive, fan-generated consumption responses, and the degree to which these interests are transnationally commodified.

Consuming celebrity

Rojek argues that through empathy or emotional connection “celebrities humanize the process of commodity consumption” (2001: 14) by symbolising the rewards that should be bestowed upon an ideal individual. Thus ideal reflexive individuality is denoted through one's personal consumption choices of the latest fashions, domestic products and hi-tech appliances, cars, cosmetics, food, beverages, pets, travel destinations – even infrequently buying a celebrity gossip magazine. Similarly, adherence to strict diets, exercise regimes and even body augmentation, demonstrates that celebrity representations inform and assist in these non-famous individuals' commitment to emulative consumption practices, whereby one can enjoy being a 'star' in their own everyday context (Marshall 1997; Rojek 2001).

Furthermore, the emulation of celebrities via leisured consumption is not only informed by notions of 'reflected glory', but also affirms the egalitarian nature of celebrity, whereby the ideals and rewards of celebrity are essentially accessible to all willing to commit to emulative consumption practices. Miller notes that it is through commodity-oriented activities that “people can construct a whole series of imaginative scenarios as to the kinds of people they wish to be” (1995: 149). Where celebrities are actively promoted and rewarded as ideal reflexive individuals, people's desire to experience the same in real, imagined or re-appropriated terms as often manifested in their

consumption practices. This demonstrates that the ideals contemporary celebrities are not only potent embodiments of ideal individual meritocracy, but that recognition of this can take place in adulatory consumption practices, which I discuss below in reference to the sexualised gaze of Figwit's creators.

Where it is not possible to achieve these ideals, aspects of an esteemed celebrity lifestyle can and are reconfigured, co-opted into individual intersubjective engagements. These emulative and/or adulating practices vary widely amongst individuals as symbolic, material or imagined expressions that can range from straight-out genuine fan worship through to simply buying Elle Macpherson branded underwear because they were on sale. This example demonstrates that celebrity endorsed and created products are also perceived to embody and uphold the ideas of reflexive individualism, especially the notion that celebrities possess transferable skills and knowledge, and also possess in-depth knowledge or insight into fashion, underwear, alcohol, perfume and cosmetics far. Specifically, celebrity endorsed products maintain the notion that their ideal reflexive individuality can manifest into other fields of action and they can display a wide range of expertise in ways that non-celebrities could not achieve as easily (see below). Nevertheless, in spite of these potentially wide-ranging consumption strategies, undertaken by celebrities and consumers alike, it is evident that the ubiquity of celebrity emulation/adulation practices are strongly informed by corporate/ profit interests of the entertainment industry and associated manufacturing industries (Gamson 1994; Gledhill 1991; Marshall 1997; Turner 2004).

Thus while celebrities may be exceptionally talented and good looking individuals, the carefully cultivated, altered and 'reinvented' nature of their appearance and ideal personas is not so apparent. The array of professionals - ranging from publicists, make-up artists to agents and personal trainers - invested in the promotion of the individually named and recognised celebrity, who often make discrete alterations to a person's name, hair, fashion choices, tone of inflexion, home décor and life trajectories to create the image of an

ideal individual are largely obscured from the public view. Other 'behind-the-scenes' personnel include the fashion designers, pattern-makers, perfumer makers, underwear manufacturers and even the sewing machinists, who actually manufacture and design the celebrity-endorsed products. Thus recognisable, widely-known celebrities, who are cast as individuals that have successfully and independently negotiated their lifestyles within the constantly changing and conflicting conditions of contemporary post-industrial society. Yet they appear this way because they are assembled in such manner by a committed network of people whose work is concealed from the selective and illusory representations they help to generate.

Celebrities are intentionally biographised to personify ideal reflexive individualism, which is clearly evident in an array of media outlets and products that frame the public access and insight into ideal celebrity individuals. For instance, magazine articles about celebrities' hobbies, humanitarian campaigns, latest blockbuster movie, best selling album or book. Other basic biographic information, such as name (birth and screen names), age, height and professional C.V.s can be found on cast profiles, in FAQs, magazines, books, or websites such as IMDb (www.imdb.com)²⁷, personal celebrity websites and also in movie-specific studio generated websites. The widespread public access to celebrity individual's personal information is quite unlike non-famous people, who, in their self-assembled attempts of ideal reflexive subjectivity, often lack the support and guidance of a coterie of industry experts and professionals to craft and widely disseminate idealised biographies. Although the popularity of personal weblogs and websites amongst internet users convincingly demonstrates that many ordinary people actively pursue such contrived and idealised autobiographic constructions. Although, the ascent to fame is not entirely premised on an individual's distinctive talent or aesthetic physical perfection, rather it may

²⁷ Internet Movie Database is one of the most comprehensive and popular cinema information websites that has information about individual films, actors, television shows, video games and industry professionals. Currently the searchable online database has over 2.5 million biographies and resumes for individual actors, directors and film production crew and over 1 million unique title entries for films, TV shows, series and mini-series, as well as video games (http://www.imdb.com/database_statistics.)

have more do with how the individual aligns with the interests of the star-making structures and how their appearance or talents can be altered to be consistent with ideal celebrity biographies (see Gamson 1994; Gledhill 1991).

The sexualised gaze is commodified

In Chapter Two I examined Iris, Jen, Sherry and Tanya's individual responses to movie. I explained how after seeing FOTR each was motivated to search online for Tolkien-movie related information, and like-minded people to share their interest in the film. Looking at their initial online TORn participation, which was most visible on the 'swooning, drooling', adulatory message boards, it became clearly evident that their LOTR fandom was strongly motivated by a highly gendered and sexualised response to the cinematic representation of Tolkien's story. In this respect the sexualised and gendered fan practices the women participated in demonstrates aspects of celebrity consumption.

I noted that the fan interpretations/adulatory responses on the TORn message threads typically detailed personal interpretations and responses to particular actors or characters. Thus, within the 'swooning, drooling' boards, which Iris and her friends first participated on, users' articulated and discussed what constituted their ideal sexual, physical and personality aesthetics. Iris explained how these preferences were formed through the film and then enacted on the message boards:

In the movie there is really something for every girl, every taste: There's the pretty boy, elvish Legolas type. There's the cutesy, boyish hobbit; the manly - like Boromir, Aragorn - stubble type. And really, even the older women that love the movie and love the book, really swooning all over the place... I can just sit there and stare at all the guys [in the film]. Eye candy, definitely. (Iris, documentary interview)

Thus, amongst the TORn fans, characters were aligned with existing ideal male aesthetic stereotypes that in turn reflected the different personal tastes of the respective fans. Which were, according to Iris, quite openly adulated and admired on these specific message boards. These sexualised and

gendered readings demonstrate the degree to which users' reflexive individual preferences were visibly referenced and shared in the online environment to be consumed as "eye candy" (Iris, documentary interview), particularly in message threads such as Estrogen Island.

Moreover, these personal responses and constructions of ideal aesthetic stereotypes are open to numerous consumer practices. For example, the 'swooning, drooling' gaze, which for some TORn fans may translate into purchasing movie merchandise, magazines, autographed photographs or collecting trading cards. The latter was clearly evident in the documentary footage of the Scottish Fellowship founder, Arielle Schnepf. Her home, called "Rivendell"²⁸, was a shrine to LOTR and was full of associated merchandise, such as toys, figurines, posters, collectable art and memorabilia, such as autographed photos from LOTR actors. Specifically, in Figwit, as more was known about Bret McKenzie's other talents as a musician and comedian, Figwit fans purchased albums released by him, and attended his comedy shows. Incidentally, the documentary footage captures Arielle's framed photograph of Bret and her Flight of the Conchords ticket displayed on her mantelpiece. While, these examples demonstrate how adulatory celebrity consumption practices are closely linked with people's self-oriented interests and reflexive ideals, these practices also very easily translate into commodity purchasing, which is particularly evident in the LOTR film franchise (Thompson 2007).

With regards to Figwit, it is interesting that a large Hollywood production allowed and actively embraced his existence. Although the close relationship between Peter Jackson and LOTR fans has been noted as a key difference to previous filmmakers' and film studios relationships with fan consumers²⁹

²⁸ Rivendell is a fictional location in Tolkien's LOTR. It is the residence of Elven lord, Elrond and where the pivotal Council of Elrond took place when Frodo decides to carry the One Ring to Mordor.

²⁹ Shefrin (2004) argues that Jackson and New Line Cinema's courting of online fans "has provided an alternate model for envisioning future producer-consumer alliances in the field of media production." Whereas *Star Wars* director, George Lucas and production company, Lucasfilm, whose output, filmmaking style and fan following are comparable to *Lord of the Rings*, characterises the role of their

(Shefrin 2004; Thompson 2007). Jackson's production did not restrict the women's particularly 'tongue-in-cheek' elf creation, but made the further step of incorporating the character into the production and 'playing along' with the fans, by giving Bret McKenzie a cameo role in the final instalment of the trilogy. The Figwit documentary was also given permission to conduct interviews with many high-profile cast and crew, including Jackson himself, who was captioned in the documentary as a 'film enthusiast'. In my media analysis it was plainly obvious that all of LOTR cast and crew humorously reproduced the parody spirit of Figwit in their documentary interviews. Thompson notes Jackson's fan-friendly approach is a model that other Hollywood interests will replicate in future projects (2007: 134).

To this extent how much management and manipulation occurs in celebrity representations is not entirely unknown to the audience, but individual consumer practices of celebrity media will vary from complete ignorance of manufactured images to critical; ironic; harmless fun; self-deprecating; or even obsessively admiring (Bacon-Smith 1992; Ferris 2001; Gamson 1994; Hills 2002). However, at some point these individual media practices all engage with a commercially generated product that has been made available for their consumption. Gripsrud elaborates:

The audience can never choose something it has not been offered, and any specific programme or product offered is always one of several "imaginable" answer to a demand. It is always producers or senders that decide what is offered, and how these offered are shaped; and *these decisions are always made with a view to other factors than the demand of the audience* – not at least the desire for maximum profit. (2002: 289 emphasis added)

So while the production and consumption of Figwit simultaneously aligns and inverts the ideals of celebrity, it did not conflict with or infringe upon the corporate movie production's interests. Additionally, Figwit brought increasing interest towards the movie in more widespread ways than the publicity offices of the film production itself (see Chapter Four).

online fan bases as “ “illegal pirates” of corporately-owned intellectual property”(262).

Thus, embedded in the symbol of Figwit are the highly reflexive and focused intentions of his creators, but also the commercial interests of Jackson's movie production. For Figwit's creators the ability to generate their own specific object of fandom clearly highlights the capabilities of online interactivity, but also the dynamism of offline conditions, such as ideal reflexive individual narratives and its attendant contemporary celebrity manifestations. That these were able to be enacted through online forums, presents the potential for increasingly reflexive and individual *shared* social practices (see Chapter Four). Moreover, the interest generated by Figwit was manifested in Jackson's relationship with commercial movie interests and also in his relationship with offline/online fans demonstrates how Figwit was a meaningful symbol to many seemingly varied interests.

Summary

In this chapter I have continued to explore the connections between online and offline worlds by focusing on the wider social narratives that have informed the Figwit online community. As Figwit is a parody of contemporary celebrity, I defined celebrity and discussed aspects of its social and cultural purpose through a historical analysis of high-status, socially elevated individuals. These historical changes illustrated that the enduring and changing qualities of celebrities were closely linked with wider social structural conditions. In my examination of post-industrial society, I introduced the concept of reflexive individualism in its ideal and practicable forms, and found that contemporary celebrities are constructed and interpreted as ideal models of these values. My analysis of Figwit also revealed that the elf extra closely aligned with contemporary ideals of celebrity. Consequently, the actions of his creators' celebrity consumption practices also drew attention to the highly commercialised and commodified nature of contemporary celebrity.

The women's sexualised gaze and identification of ideal male stereotypes in the FOTR film, which was realised through their participation on the

‘swooning, drooling’ TORn online message boards made visible the attributes that were considered ideal by adulatory female fans. Also, made visible through their online TORn activities, was the degree that users could actively construct and define the different qualities of their admired celebrity, thus illustrating that celebrity adulation and admiration is practiced through highly reflexive and individually-oriented ways.

Reflexive individualism has emerged as a result of institutionalised individualism (Beck 2002), reflexive knowledge structures and systems (Giddens 1991; Lash 1994) and the increased mobility of capital and labour (Gellner 1983) that are embedded in the structural conditions of post-industrialism. Consequently people, irrespective of other dialogic considerations, are compelled to negotiate increasingly self-oriented, individually determined life trajectories against a backdrop of a highly stratified meritocracy. The structural inequalities of this meritocracy are obscured by the individualised conditions, as the attendant rewards of a stratified meritocracy encourage people to construct and articulate their individual identities through symbolic and material consumption (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000). Therefore, reflexive individual success is not guaranteed across class, gender and other axes of social differentiation, although its ideals are widely disseminated through institutional structures, such as formal education curricula. In this respect ideal reflexive individualism is a major influence on contemporary post-industrial notions of personhood and subjectivity formation.

In my analysis of contemporary celebrity, I found that aspects of ideal reflexive individualism were evident in most contemporary celebrities, who were commonly actors, musicians and sportspeople, or people whose notable self-determined achievements that warranted recognition. I found that contemporary celebrities were adulated and emulated for their seemingly autonomous performances, actions and interactions, receiving immediate recognition, celebration and reward for their individual achievements. I noted that these attributes were also present in my ethnographic site, where

the fictional character Figwit was aligned, and was imbued, with ideal celebrity characteristics even as a parody of contemporary celebrity.

Through my analysis I found that highly commercialised and commodified nature of contemporary celebrity significantly influenced the ideal celebrity constructions; setting pathways for emulative and adulatory practices for fans and consumers through the consumption of celebrity endorsed products and movie merchandise were obvious examples of this.

The creation and consumption of Figwit emerged as a response to the online LOTR movie fan community, and therefore is an example of present-day fan consumption. The opportunity for movie audiences to engage in their self-determined and highly focused forms of fandom, like Figwit, revealed a mutual beneficial relationship between fan collectives and movie industry interests. In the ethnographic context of Figwit, recognition from the movie producers further legitimated their “little joke” (Te Hanu, *Frodo is great...who is that?!!* documentary interview), and led to unintended consequences.

The wider attention that Figwit and his creators received from global media coverage and from the movie-producers led to unintended consequences for the online Figwit community such as their parody endeavours being misrepresented. The ethnographically complex nature of these developments clearly demonstrates new possibilities created by the dialogic relationship between offline and online social worlds. In Chapter Four I examine how the women’s parody of contemporary celebrity and reflexively-aware constructions of their online personas were actively reconciled with their middle class habitus, reflexive individualism in practice and ideal form, and in their online self-celebrity and social validation.

CHAPTER FOUR: New possibilities

Introduction

In this chapter I look at some of the new possibilities and configurations that emerge within the hybridised online-offline creation and community of Figwit. I analyse the materiality of online architecture and the ways in which it configures users' activities and interactivity. Chiefly, I focus on how the internet enables users to identify and create categories of hyper-distinction, and how it also privileges intensified reflexivity evident in users' online navigations. I also examine how these aspects encourage diverse and sometimes contradictory interpretations of online interaction. I analyse the various communication genres of the internet (e.g. chatrooms, discussion boards, websites). I illustrate how these significantly facilitate a continuum of interactivity ranging from highly collaborative and participatory online conversations (e.g. TORn message boards) through to more static and visually engaged 'texts' (e.g. FigwitLives website) and how these may contribute to the new and sometimes unpredictable consequences for online users. Fundamentally, I argue that online sociability is configured through extensive, networked, asynchronous and diverse audiences, and although often manifest in intensified and idealised ways, nevertheless reproduces offline hegemonies of social interaction. This aligns with the central aim of my thesis, which argues that online and offline are a dynamic continuum of socio-cultural practices.

In my analysis of Figwit I examine aspects of the internet's material architecture, which allows users to draw hyper-distinctions through the highly textual, participatory, searchable, archived and generative communication practices of online socio-technical frameworks. Here, I draw upon boyd's analysis of online technological configurations, which recognise "persistence, searchability, exact copyability, and invisible audiences" (2007: 128). I focus on the inherent textuality of online communication, which enables frequent revision, re-writing and re-editing, and illustrates the degree to which

intensely reflexive authorship is privileged through online interactivity. I argue that these conditions are heightened by the seemingly instantaneous and rhetorical features of online communication that provide increased opportunities for direct rebuttal or affirmation from other web users. I also focus on the wide scope of potential social connections that are made possible through online technological networks, where a substantial number of individuals are meaningfully connected to one another. With regards to my ethnographic focus, I argue that the formation of the Figwit online community, which was established as a parody of and within an existing 'sub-field' of TORn fandom, clearly exemplifies the online capacity to recognise hyper-distinction and form very specific and finely differentiated common interest groups within online social networks.

Lash argues that online structures and accordant practices present users with repeated opportunities for intensified reflexive engagements (1994: 161). Through the ethnographic context of Figwit I also analyse how his creators' online participation noticeably resulted in idealised and intensified narrative expressions and performative displays of their ideal reflexive individuality. Interestingly my analysis of Figwit clearly highlights the way his creators interpret their online interactivity as comparatively more authentic and positive than their offline situations. Furthermore, while online contexts can certainly provide new opportunities for identity expression and community formation, these are still constrained by offline hegemonies, which are reproduced through users' own social backgrounds (or habitus) and reflexive inclinations that in turn influence their online navigations, expressions, performances and interpretations. The interactivity of the computer interface is typically "a highly structured form of mutual fatefulness." (Goffman, cited in Wittel et al. 2002: 197)

I then examine how Figwit's creators' online participation through the TORn network was characteristically oriented towards recognising and constructing hyper-distinctions amongst other TORn users. Furthermore, I examine how the formation of the women's online Figwit community, and its rapid

development into a media spectacle resulted in tangible offline consequences for Figwit's creators in ways they had not anticipated or necessarily desired. Arguably the internet's hyper-distinctive capacities enables the generation of highly-focused and online network-specific subtleties that may be unintelligible to others users. This generative capacity and the users' robust creation of online hyper-distinctions is due to their pragmatic understanding of the material architecture of the internet and to their own offline socio-cultural milieus where the struggle for social distinction is omnipresent (Bourdieu 1984).

In the production and consumption of Figwit I examine how diverse interpretations of Figwit contradict the intentions and online personas of his creators. Here Figwit's progressively elaborate online appearance (e.g. from discussion thread topic, to stand-alone website and consequently offline media spectacle) clearly reveals how the intensified and idealised experiences of his creators diverged across the different genres of the internet. I draw upon my personal encounters of the FigwitLives website and analyse why the in-joke was not apparent to other online users, such as myself. Here I discuss the offline-online dialogic in terms of contested interpretations arising from varied reflexive interests. I conclude this chapter by arguing that the new possibilities emerging from the offline-online dialogic are often specific to the individuals' existing internet proficiencies, and offline sociability and reflexivity.

The architecture of the internet

The present configuration of computer hardware in the form of a graphical user interface (GUI) typically allows for a single user to operate a peripheral (i.e. the entire 'computer' set-up, which includes the hard-drive, software, keyboard, mouse, monitor, intra and internet networks) at any one time. Most users are likely to log on as a single-user using a stand-alone or single computer. This, of course, does not exclude opportunities of shared use

where people may be watching the user play an online game; webchatting to friends or family; or reading and composing emails together. Furthermore, the structure of computer usage via its technologies significantly compels individually executed practices such as writing documents and this reflexive ethos is further enhanced through the individual engagement of online activities such as surfing the internet; composing emails; playing online games; participating in chatrooms or on discussion forums. Arguably internet-mediated communication especially favours individualised and intimate communication flows because computer hardware and software are fundamentally *designed* for single user engagement although this typically leads to multi-user, online interactivity. In addition the technical configurations of online websites also shape users' reflexive orientations. For example, the TORn membership process requires each person to have a unique screen name and password. This apparently simple structure basically ensures that one of the key ideals of reflexive individualism – namely the possession of a unique personality or persona (Howland 2007) – is not only structurally compelled, but is also easily achieved.

Miller (1995) notes that material imperatives of a technology may allow for new and novel ways of being. The internet's capacity for instantaneousness and seemingly widespread social connectivity, which allows communication and information exchange to take place from different timezones and in the non co-presence of communicators, is substantially different to the ways in which typical offline face-to-face communication and interactions occur (boyd 2007). The internet is structured so that users are connected across asynchronous geographic and temporal locales, which itself provides opportunities for reflexively attuned information and communication access. In other words, provided people have online access they can ideally participate whenever they want and with whomever they are reflexive-inclined to interact with. For the Figwit creators this meant they were able to readily find (or perhaps even generate) like-minded others who shared in their penchant for parodying mythical Tolkien elves. Thus while their socio-technical relationships were not immediately realised, their initial TORn

forays further served to validate their independently reflexive, yet shared, intense liking of LOTR, which evaded had the creators' in their respective offline social contexts (see Chapter Two). Close examination of webpages, blogs, message threads and emails, which were the primary forms of communication used by the Figwit women in the formation and ongoing maintenance of their online community, reveals the degree to which users can search, trace, explicitly articulate their interests and enables users to explicitly frame intensified and idealised identity practices.

Online possibilities

Online researchers acknowledge that the 'materiality' (Miller and Slater 2000) of online technologies enable users to adroitly represent themselves (Baym 2000; boyd 2007), but also to continuously reconfigure or adjust these online presentations (Hine 2000) through the active creation of, or participation in, web pages, websites, hyperlinks³⁰, emails and forum posts (Wittel et al 2002: 196). The degree to which the inherent textual condition of online communication has been embraced by users illustrates the degree to which reflexive authorship is highly valued.

The structure of online engagement and consequential communications is inherently textual and are significantly enabled to create ideal, intensified coherent and accurate authorship and continuous associated identity performances/narratives and interactivity. Although many offline social interactions and performances are reflexively staged (Goffman 1969), thus potentially containing elements of self-censure, editing and pragmatic communication strategies, the 'real-time' sociability of most offline contexts does not always, or necessarily, facilitate the type of prior communication

³⁰ Hyperlinking is a noticeably different form of compiling and navigating online information. Its configuration is distinctly nonlinear, say, in comparison to a book, in that users 'click-through' highlighted text to open up information pertaining to that subject-text. The World Wide Web being a "network of networks" (Uimonen, cited in Wilson and Peterson 2002: 452), and comprising of millions, if not billions of hyperlinks, illustrates the potentially infinite numbers of ways that users may navigate and access information in an online context.

editing and associated impression management that is typical of online interactions (boyd 2007).

Extending boyd's analysis of the material architecture of the internet (i.e. its "persistence, searchability, exact copyability, and invisible audiences" (2007: 128), the Figwit women's use of the internet reveals features that go beyond boyd's observations. In this sense, the instantaneous responses that users receive from other online users demonstrates how online conversations are structured towards immediate and direct affirmation, rebuttal and/or transformed dialogue, which was clearly evident in Sherry and Iris' initial online conversations (see Chapter Two).

Intensified reflexivity and socialability

The structural features of online communication allows users new opportunities that are different to their offline social practices. Previously I discussed the women's enthusiastic response to the TORn message boards (see Chapter Two), which prompted their increased involvement on TORn. The women's responses to TORn message boards draws attention to the highly participatory, dynamic aspects of this technosocial environment, which Iris and others often referred to as very busy and highly social. Membership is open to anyone who undertakes the TORn membership process, and is permanent unless individual users were extremely offensive, in which case they would be banned from the TORn website.

The formation of an online Figwit community through the online TORn message boards also illustrates how online interactivity through this particular genre of the internet attracted like-minded others. For example, when I asked Jen what encouraged her to participate in Figwit, it was clear that the intelligent humour of the parody prompted her involvement:

[It] just looked like they were having fun and there're a lot of neat ideas there, and *people seemed really funny and intelligent*. And so I sort of shyly stepped in and started posting, and I think actually one of my first posts were about Figwit – which is kinda funny. (Jen, interview. Emphasis added)

For Iris, her online interactivity enabled the performance and articulation of her self-oriented interests in ways that were perceived to be impossible through her offline social contexts:

the internet lets you connect with people who share your interests and hobbies when in real life you're usually surrounded by people you didn't choose based on where you live, where you work etc. You only get to choose your friends and even then it's unlikely they will share ALL your interests (just like none of my RL [real life] friends were interested in LoTR). The internet ended up exceeding my expectations because it exposed me to NEW interests instead of just letting me develop old interests. (email interview)

Thus the opportunities presented to Iris through her online navigations not only illustrates the ways that online technology enables users to readily seek out like-minded others , but also offers enhanced, even new, possibilities for the pursuit and creation of reflexive interests. Furthermore these features of online interactivity, such as its inherent textuality, tangibly altered Iris' actions:

Online Iris is less shy about everything- voicing opinions, being confrontational, telling dirty jokes etc. I think there's a name for that... internet disinhibition effect(?) or something like that... (email interview)

Interestingly, Iris was not concerned about the offline implications of her online interactivity. However, Iris was concerned with how other online TORn users interpreted her penchant for casual, humorous LOTR fandom as opposed to the typically serious LOTR fan practices

I did sometimes feel like I talk about funny/shallow (figwit was both) stuff too much instead of seriously debating the books/movies. I felt a little self conscious about that, wondering if the more serious members think of me the same way everyone (including me) think of those new young users.(Iris, email interview)

Iris' message posts makes evident the manner in which online interactivity provokes intensified and potentially ideal reflexive individuality in users, and also the degree that users are sensitive to others' biographisation and social distinction classifications. Indeed, the overtly textual, responsive and

traceable structure of the internet routinely encourages users' to engage rhetorical framing and justifications of their online personas. For example, Sherry's online reply to a message post asking who Figwit was, explicitly details how she intended Figwit to be interpreted as a humorous parody:

Allow me to explain...Figwit is the name inDUHvidual started using with me (I came up with a rude version of Figwit which I won't post here) regarding an elf at the council of Elrond. That is not his real name. inDUH says Figwit stands for Frodo is grea...who is that!!! If you look on any of her posts you'll see the pic [picture] of him, next to Aragorn. He has become our running joke, as he speaks no lines and is on screen for seconds! We banter about what he is going to say etc and just have fun with it. If anyone can actually work out who he really is she would be most pleased. It has become a topic of conversation and until a couple of days ago we could not find a pic of him then 2 turned up! Anymore I can help with ask away! (Sherry, TORn message post, n.d.)

Sherry's post illustrates how she wanted to be known to other TORn users as an intentionally ironic and intellectual individual. Her post also illustrates the technical mechanisms that enable individuals to actively and strategically maintain their online identities, for example as Sherry explicitly detailed her contribution to the parodying nature of Figwit. Furthermore in her subsequent interview with the documentary film-makers, Sherry clearly displayed an acute awareness of how her intended humour and satire of Figwit could be misconstrued and how this impacted on her deliberately assembled online identity:

All the swooning; and the FAQ and the parodies - you know - I don't want people to sort of get the wrong impression from the off. But on the other hand I don't want to come across as looking so stupid - you know - that people they're just gonna think that we're just complete bimbos, brainless whatever. Cos it could be further from the truth. You agonise about it - and maybe some people don't think about how you're gonna come across, you just wanna, sort of have your chance to be known. But I would rather do it for the reasons I want to do it for - the right reasons that I can live with than just doing it for the sake of doing it. I couldn't. (Sherry, "Frodo is great... who is that?!!" documentary interview)

The Figwit producers' initial online interactions demonstrate how their specific reflexive dispositions were configured towards ideal self-presentation, and furthermore how socio-technical engagements invoke highly attuned self-

awareness where online identity constructions are typically cognisant of other people's interpretations. In my conversations with Iris and Sherry, their expectation of autobiographic-biographic consistency was very evident, I believe that this was due to the ease with which ideal reflexive individuality and impression management can be achieved through online technological frameworks. In other words, the inherent textuality of the internet ideally meant that autobiographic-biographic ambiguities could be overcome by users' committed and continual use of the communication medium and via their reflexively-oriented efforts to ensure that their online contributions were "read" (Sherry, documentary interview) correctly in ways that could differ from their offline socio-cultural contexts.

Hyper-distinction

"The Message Boards are divided into six different forums. Main Board is the virtual community of TheOneRing.net - here is the place for a good laugh, songs, top ten lists, polls, and more. The Reading Room is your place to fire away all your unanswered questions about the books. We also hold chapter discussions here every week. Movie Discussion is the forum in which we discuss everything that has to do with the movies. From the latest spoiler picture to the ongoing comparison with Harry Potter and Star Wars, everything is being discussed here. Why aren't they updating the official site? There's always someone around that can tell you exactly why. The Arena, Gaming, and Feedback are less frequently used forums, but they serve their needs." (TORn *Newbie guide* n.d.: 6)

Even though TORn was the online portal for all things LOTR-related, the technical and social configurations within this website clearly facilitated the fluid creation of hyper-distinctive subfields. Within the website, specialised areas fans were essentially disciplined to engage in *their* type of Tolkien/LOTR-interests, which were often manifest as quite restrictive and focussed areas of topic specificity. For example, discussion areas about weaponry, costumes or the film adaptation's accurate representation of Tolkien's work etc. Jen explained that the Figwit parody was intentionally created to be distinct from the existing highly sexualised, adulatory female LOTR fandom dominating the online TORn message boards:

Yeah it was a backlash to that and Legolas was getting real, real big; so here we had Figwit to contrast to Legolas. (Jen, interview)

As the Figwit creators quickly found, users needed be familiar with the way TORn was being used by its members, for example, knowing the appropriate areas to 'swoon' was important. In fact Iris noted that: "Posting something girly in a male dominated forum often results in unwanted (even hostile) attention." (email interview) Also when Iris first visited the boards she noted how attempts were repeatedly made to ensure that the website was purposefully ordered:

the mods [moderators] kept trying to make everyone post in the correct board but they could never pull it off. (email interview)

In many respects the contestment or disruption of convergent message threads was due to individuals posting messages without an understanding or knowledge of how TORn online discussions were organised around specific LOTR topic and sub-topic areas. Also the dynamic and instantaneous nature of the technology, and the sheer volume of participation traffic meant that online message thread could rapidly go off-topic. The moderators, who were high-profile, widely respected TORn members and message posters, constantly monitored and advised users of appropriate discussion protocols and thread content. This illustrates how online communities attempt to actively maintain boundaries, both external and internal, and thus order people's online participation and interactions. Furthermore, it also demonstrates how specific online interests may be explicitly delineated from one another and in effect how the reflexive, yet shared, interests of various participants can be compartmentalised, hyper-distinguished and intensified through their online interactivity.

As the 'swooning and drooling' girl message threads on TORn did not represent the women's critical engagement with LOTR, Figwit's creators sought out and generated practices that they collectively understood and which also actively distinguished from the adulatory, female fandom. Iris explained:

I don't think that anyone (including myself) truly did think that Figwit was as equally worthy of attention as Aragorn or any of the other main characters. (Iris, email interview)

Aragorn and Figwit are both fictional characters so getting overly attached to either is silly and tease-able[sic]. I guess I was mimicking over the top teenybopper behaviour which invites even *more* teasing and mockery...(Iris, email interview)

Iris' comments illustrate that her and her online friends were clearly aware of the, low status of 'swooning, drooling' fandom had on the online TORn boards. In particular, through their participation in these specific online TORn areas, it is evident that the Figwit creators' ironically manipulated and played with the highly gendered, adulatory online fandom. The intelligent play distinguished them as intentional and competent tertiary-educated middle class individuals within the online TORn environment (see Chapter Two).

Social Validation

In addition, through the constructive formation of the online community Figwit's creators themselves received social validation. For example, Iris being recognised amongst the TORn message board network as "the girl who started Figwit" (Iris, email interview), and the subsequent affirmative contributions from other TORn users by way of ancillary Figwit websites, fan art and poems clearly socially validated the women's Figwit activities.

Digital architecture, which essentially facilitates textual and visual communication between interested individuals, facilitates online interactivity that typically raises new possibilities for social validation. Besides the development of FigwitLives and other independent ancillary Figwit websites, the consequential offline appearance of Figwit in ROTK and the manufacture of trading cards were clearly understood by some TORn users as a triumph of their online efforts. Furthermore, through the digital frameworks of online

interactions, which are highly traceable (e.g. through unique ISP (internet service providers) numbers, location of servers etc)³¹, online contacts can be precisely quantified especially through web hit counters that many websites use. Here is an example of traceability from an LOTR elf fan website. Note how the website is configured to tally the number of visitors accessing the website:



Fig. 6. Elf Liberation Society homepage with web counter
(www.geocities.com/elfliberationsociety/)

Although FigwitLives does not have a publicly visible web hit counter, this information was nevertheless collated and in combination with the collaborative aspects of online digital architecture discussed above, clearly illustrates how Figwit's creators received social validation for their parody elf endeavours. The quantifiable and traceable nature of online data significantly influenced Iris' intentions to maintain upkeep of the website, where her

³¹Insofar as the internet is considered anonymous and 'private', recently users have begun to realise the public and highly accessible nature of online interactivity. In 2006 America Online (AOL) breached its users' privacy by releasing all the search queries and websites visited through its service:

A list of 20 million search inquiries collected over a three-month period was published last month on a new Web site (research.aol.com) meant to endear AOL to academic researchers by providing several sets of data for study. AOL assigned each of the users a unique number, so the list shows what a person was interested in over many different searches. The release of the data shines a light on how much information people disclose about themselves, phrase by phrase, as they use search engines. (*AOL Removes Search Data on Group of Web Users*, 2006)

motivation to keep Figwit news current was reliant on the numbers of visitors the FigwitLives site attracted:

I used to check and it was 70000 [website hits per month]. And then I stopped checking because, you know, if I see that no one comes to the [web]site then, maybe, well, I won't do that update. On purpose I didn't look at it, because I am lazy enough. (Iris, documentary interview)

The quantifiable features of the internet also resulted in Figwit's creators receiving recognition through respected online institutions. For example, in Iris' documentary interview, she explained that Figwit's profile on the online search engine, *Yahoo!* was on par with major characters from the LOTR story:

This is big news. There's google and there's yahoo – the two big sites, search engines. Figwit has his own category now right there with Aragorn and Arwen and Gandalf – Figwit has more sites than Gandalf, he has 5 and Gandalf has 4. And Legolas has 5 also...The fact it's right there with all the other characters, from the book – not the movie. It's [the search page] not even about the movie. Look, it's under "Tolkien the book", not the movie. It's insane. [Interviewer: 'And it's under characters?'] And it's under characters, I love it! (Iris, documentary interview)

Moreover, the ease of data storage and collation, which is an inherent property of online technological frameworks, quantifiably (and perhaps unequivocally) asserts the social popularity of individuals online interactivities and thus can legitimate their ideal reflexivity.

Iris' reaction to this is particularly telling, and reveals the ways that quantifiable online frameworks can legitimate and affirm people's online interactivities in uniquely technosocial ways. For Iris recognition from *Yahoo!* illustrates some reflected genuine celebrity recognition that their Figwit attracted, albeit in a parodying, humorous way.

So we made it! We're famous! (documentary interview)

The excitement in Iris' response makes evident the ways individuals derive ideal reflexive affirmation and recognition through online fame. Her response also illustrates that the desire to receive fame is not particular to

contemporary celebrities. To the contrary, the widespread pursuit of ideal reflexive individualism is significantly premised on the social recognition and validation of the self as a unique and valued personality. This was evidenced by Figwit's creators and Iris' reaction to the recognition the elf extra received through online institutions other than TORn and demonstrates that non-celebrity individuals routinely desire high status.

Furthermore this legitimated and encouraged them to constructively respond with evermore progressively elaborate manifestations of Figwit. Sherry explains how the social validation that the women received through the TORn message boards clearly prompted their creation of the Figwit FAQ and their subsequent development of the FigwitLives website:

We just did [it] because people took an interest, a few people took an interest, and enough people did [so] that it turned into a FAQ; a FAQ turned into a website. (Sherry, documentary interview)

The online social validation the women received also demonstrates how their autonomous, reflexively-determined interpretation of TORn humour was understood and appreciated by other individuals, who were arguably pursuing their own reflexive agendas. Thus, for Figwit's creators the social validation Figwit attracted was not so much about the parody itself, but was a social acknowledgment of their individual reflexivity, as the following message post reveals:

Arwenelf... we should write a Figwit FAQ you have no idea how many ppl [people] asked about him today... oh here I go again...grinning like an idiot... (Iris, TORn message post, n.d.)

Collaborative interactivity

The evolution of the Figwit collaboration also reveals some of the consequences that arose from online interactivity. For example, the ease with which Jen joined in the online discussions about Figwit, and where the women could readily reflexively participate by making jokes and teasing each

other, is contrasted with the rapid evolution of a wider, yet comparatively less participatory or more fixed, online Figwit community centred on the FigwitLives site. Although individuals could email the FigwitLives creators with questions about the Figwit parody and could contribute material to the site (see below), the FigwitLives site did not have discussion boards so it lacked the immediacy, dynamism and openness of previous online discussions that had occurred in TORn. In this respect the narrative of the Figwit parody became more monolithic, primarily reflecting the Figwit creators' intentions and aspirations, which were further entrenched by their capacity to vet and edit material contributed to FigwitLives.

This was particularly evident in the rapid ascent of Figwit when FigwitLives came to the attention of Te Hanu, (screen-name of Erica Challis), co-editor and co-founder of TORn, she filed the following report on the TORn homepage, which at the time received over 95,000 hits per day. Here Te Hanu's post clearly highlights the inherent characteristics of static textuality of FigwitLives and thus rapidly broadcasts a comparatively fixed interpretation of Figwit that is quite unlike the collaborative and dynamic discourse that online message boards facilitated amongst a group of TORn members:

Who is Figwit?

4/12/02, 7:57 pm EST - [Tehanu](#)

For a while now the TORN messageboards have been full of puzzling references to 'Figwit.' Who was this character? Evidently some Kiwi extra in the Council of Elrond scene who has no idea how many hearts he's breaking. See New Zealand's answer to Orlando Bloom at [Figwit Lives!](#) Thanks to ArwenElf, InDUHViDual and their tireless research minions.
(archives.theonering.net/archives/main_news/4.08.02-4.14.02)

However, as a consequence of the Te Hanu report, the FigwitLives site was inundated with visitors and emails, thus giving insight into the ways online interactivities may be radically and rapidly altered by the socio-technical architecture of the online. For example, Sherry explained how these developments impacted on the Figwit team:

Things went crazy overnight. Our poor little site hosted at Geocities could not cope with the volume of traffic and crashed any number of times within a few hours of the news running on TORn. Iris and I were swamped by emails from the off and Iris had her work cut out trying to keep the site up and running. I discovered all about bandwidth or rather lack of it, in a few short hours! We were amazed at the interest in the site and people's responses to what we had done. Most of it was positive and people seemed to get our sense of humour and laughed with us. (Sherry, person.archive)

Nevertheless the development of the FigwitLives site undoubtedly further embellished the parody of Figwit, as the difference between parody and genuine adulation was more ambiguous when initially presented an amateur LOTR fan website. Moreover, several other TORn users began to actively acknowledge the parody by contributing their own ironic fan offerings to the Figwit women. After the FAQ was positively received amongst the Figwit TORn network, other TORn members contributed ironic fan-generated materials, such as limericks, poems, fan art, karaoke and photos, which were typically created for genuine LOTR characters and celebrities. In this respect, the women's Figwit parody had evolved into a wider parody of characteristic LOTR/TORN fan adulation practices. For example, other TORn members submitted the following image:



Fig. 7. Example of fan art (courtesy of Figwit Lives)

However, where previously the parody of Figwit was a rhetorical expression of the women's middle class dispositions and significantly validated through other people's visually-based responses by way of their FigwitLives contributions, their parody was also increasingly communicated through ancillary websites over which the women had little or no authorship. For example, the emergence of independent fan websites such Fans of Figwit, which tended towards more genuine fan adulation of Figwit. One of the creators of Fans of Figwit said "there's nothing like the satisfaction that one gets from making their *own* page about the elf they fancy most" (www.geocities.com/figwit_x/index_html - emphasis in original). Such independent online efforts essentially subverted the parody and reasserted the type of 'swooning, drooling' girl fandom that the Figwit creators were seeking to disrupt.

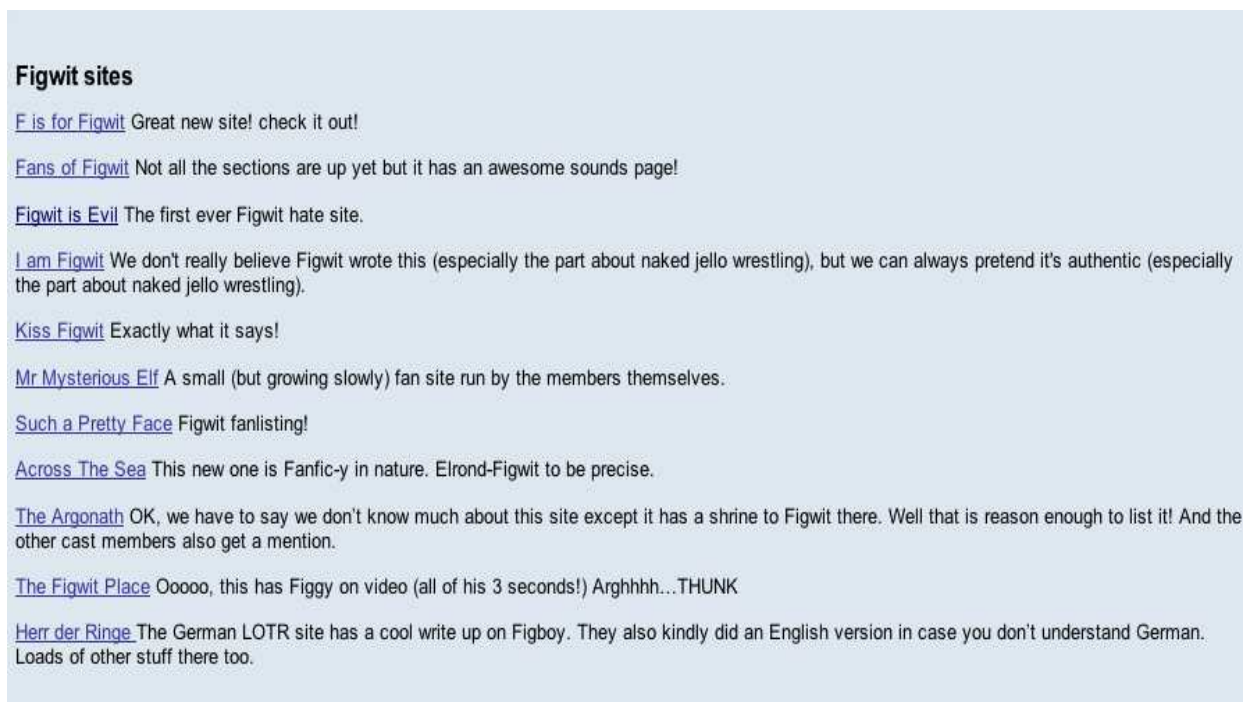


Fig. 8. Screen image of Figwit websites (Courtesy of www.figwitlives.net)

This was also evident in the hate mail the FigwitLives site received and the consequential online emergence of Figwit is Evil website. Such examples illustrate how online technological configurations readily enable users to

dynamically and creatively produce their own distinctive responses to the elf parody. Furthermore, the initial creation of Figwit on the TORn website demonstrates how differences may be cultivated within an online network, where users can spontaneously generate and more importantly maintain distinctive practices either independently, in direct collaboration with similarly-minded individuals and/or in intentional opposition to individuals with contrary perspectives. Although considerably less instantaneous than a message post reply, these examples nevertheless further illustrate the reflexive and interactivity dynamism that is enabled through online technical frameworks and which allows users to collaboratively maintain online social spaces in a manner consistent with their beliefs (Hine 2000: 112).



Fig.9. Figwit is Evil homepage image (www.geocities.com/figwit_is_evil/Evil_figwit.html)

Offline possibilities

Digital architecture configurations enable a variety of diverse interpretations and interactions that are also evident in the offline consequences of Figwit. Aside from the appearance of Figwit in ROTK and the manufacture of Figwit trading cards (see Chapter One and Three), the women's eventual meeting of one another in Edinburgh and Jen's marriage to a fellow TORn member (see Chapter Two) also reveals how online interactivity can have offline implications. Similarly, Alatar's insistence on not revealing her personal name and only using her online name in various offline contexts, such as in

the *Frodo is great... who is that?!!* documentary and in all interviews for this thesis, demonstrates ways in which unique online personas may be maintained beyond the computer. These examples illustrate the continuities that may exist across online and offline realms. However, other examples drawn from the ethnography of Figwit demonstrate that the online to offline dynamic may be discontinuous and even contradictory of the Figwit parody and of the intentionally cultivated online personas of Figwit's creators.

The technological conditions also facilitated significant offline developments in the Figwit phenomenon. For instance, unbeknownst to the women, Bret McKenzie, who played the dark-haired elf, was informed of this Figwit alter-ego through friends who frequented the TORn news pages. Within four days of the TeHanu post discussed above, and independently of Bret and the women, the same TORn newpage revealed the identity of Bret McKenzie. Furthermore five days after the TeHanu post the first article about Bret and the Figwit phenomenon appeared in *The Dominion Post*, a daily newspaper based in Wellington, New Zealand, where the LOTR movie production was being undertaken and where Bret McKenzie resided. Awareness of the FigwitLives website, and the celebrity elf extra, very rapidly moved beyond the online TORn network and into other offline and online contexts (see below) as several New Zealand media outlets reported developments in this quirky online phenomenon. For example, after reading *The Dominion Post* article, some friends and I looked up the FigwitLives website.

Moreover, divergence between Figwit's creators idealised online personas and offline interpretations, which in many instances appeared to reassert hegemonic narratives of 'swooning drooling girl' fandom, were obvious in global print media articles that appeared between April and December 2002. In these articles I noted that the women were cast as "die-hard female enthusiasts" (*Elf who launched a thousand hits*: 2002), that is as adulatory female fans who were genuinely enamoured with the elf extra from the FOTR. Also absent were references to the parody aspects of their ironic Elven creation, even when Iris and Sherry had been interviewed by these

publications. In this respect, the media representations of the Figwit women framed them within existing stereotypes of Tolkien and adulatory female fandom. These representations of Figwit's creators clearly diverged from the women's self-assembled online personas that used parody to create a social distinction between themselves and the 'swooning, drooling' online LOTR fans. Iris was aware that their online activities and identities were interpreted through other offline narratives and practices. Yet, Iris' explanation reveals the degree to which individuals are aware of the narratives they are subject to and cannot alter:

The media portrayed it more as a serious phenomenon, I guess because 'fans obsess over extra' is more interesting than 'fans jokingly obsess over extra'.
(email interview)

Iris' response also demonstrates how these external representations of their online activities evoked a sort of pragmatic, if not calculating, response within the Figwit creators. In this respect these misinterpretations were accepted and overlooked by the Figwit creators, as the opportunity to appear in the offline news positively affirmed and legitimated the women's desire for recognition and celebrity. The women's appreciation of the media coverage was clearly evident on FigwitLives where several of these news articles were accessible through the website.

Divergent or contradictory offline interpretations of the online parody were not simply restricted to news media coverage. For example, when I explained to Iris that I misinterpreted the original FigwitLives site for a serious adulatory online fan shrine, her response alerted me to how my viewing of Figwit was not at all consistent with the interpretation they had intentionally cultivated through TORn:

I was always a bit confused when other people got confused about Figwit and took it seriously. Sure, there are a lot of bizarre things on the internet but there were always things of the website that "gave it away". Take the audio page, for example- what did you think when you saw that page? That we're actually deluding ourselves into hearing Figwit's voice in blank sound files?
(Iris, email interview)

I had initially listened to the 'blank' audio files on the FigwitLives site but I had simply assumed that the amateur nature of the FigwitLives website meant that the women had not correctly uploaded the sound files. I explained to Iris that my encounters with serious Tolkien fans informed my incorrect interpretation of the website:

In my defence, living in Welly [Wellington] during the shooting and release of those movies meant infrequent encounters with *serious* Tolkien fans...so how was I to know??? Besides, I remember the first time the boys (Elijah, Dom, Orlando and Billy) [some of the main cast members from LOTR] first came to the cafe I worked at. One of the waitresses thought they were tourists, which I was also thinking until I realised I was serving Elijah Wood his eggs! So, awhile after, of course, we began to have Rings Stalkers [LOTR fans] hoping to spot one of them. Boy, could I tell you some stories about them! [the LOTR fans]...Anyway now the laugh is on me for misunderstanding Figwit back in the day, I suppose. (Yadana, email)

Iris' response to my explanation speculated why I might not have understood the joke and the reason behind my misinterpretation of the FigwitLives website:

My only explanation for this is that people didn't really explore the whole website or maybe they just got all the information from news clipping and stuff like that. Or maybe they're internet illiterates? (email interview)

My initial interpretation of Figwit as 'typical LOTR geek fandom' clearly highlights how individual navigations of the internet are highly reflexive and habitus-informed. I was embarrassed to admit to Iris that my initial online reading of Figwit was informed by my narrow concept of LOTR fandom, which was largely based on seeing LOTR tourists wandering around Wellington dressed in Middle Earth-inspired fashions (e.g. cloaks, chain mail, robes, Tolkien-art tee shirts etc).

However, my deepening understanding of Figwit via the documentary and my research also illustrates how individual's habitus and associated reflexive dispositions may be highly dynamic and an integrative process of online-offline interactions. Furthermore, my response to the Figwit phenomenon shows complex and diverse interpretations of online interactivity can be

generated by individuals who are ostensibly unknown or not part of the initial online community. Through my research I have formed ongoing online relationships with the Figwit creators, and thus their Figwit-related identities are still kept active, even though the majority of his creators' involvement has become essentially dormant. In fact, as of mid-2006 the Figwit Lives website was put on hiatus:

This website is on hiatus (in case you haven't noticed). If anything shockingly exciting happens I'll be sure to update you all.
Don't let this stop you from emailing me with your comments, news, figments, hate mail, ~~mary sue fanfics and Nigerian scams!~~ (figwitlives homepage, www.figwitlives.net)

Fundamentally the alternative and divergent interpretations of the FigwitLives website also illustrate the ways that online technological frameworks, activity and interactivity are configured through individual users' convergent/divergent offline reflexivity and other dispositions (e.g. education, geographic location, gender and age). Moreover, these aspects of individual users' offline socio-cultural worlds are strategically reproduced through their online activity and interactivity (e.g. joining discussion boards, regularly visiting websites of interest etc). Therefore, as a consequence of the dynamic and distinctive dialogic of the offline and online, a wide spectrum of individual interpretations are facilitated and provoked. Consequently, the highly idealised reflexive and habitus-informed identities constructed by online users are not easily sustained across multiple online and offline fields of action.

Similarly, Figwit's subsequent appearance in ROTK, illustrate how online pastimes may be co-opted by offline interests. In his documentary interview, Executive Producer, Mark Ordesky explained how New Line Cinema was interested in reprising Bret's appearance in the film:

I do remember, and this is serious, when I called Bob Shaye and Michael Lynne who are the co-chairmen of New Line and made them aware of the figwit phenomenon and that we thought it might be a good idea to try to include him the TTT and there might be some small expense involved. They were both very enthusiastic, they had read the *USA Today* piece and the both

felt strongly that this was a good idea and that we should try to make it happen...that's the real version and the jokey version. (Frodo is Great...Who is That?!! interview)

This illustrates the ways that Figwit was incorporated into the industry-sanctioned and generated interests, especially when the studio wanted publicity for the release of the FOTR DVD. Susan Wloszczyna, Movie and Entertainment Reporter for *USA Today*, explained how news items about LOTR were very popular during the period of the movie trilogy and that Figwit coincided with the publicity interests of both the movie studios and her publication:

I got on the phone to New Line home entertainment and talked to the publicist there. And luckily the DVD was coming out within a week, so they were eager to have something like this to promote it. And considering he's only on screen for 3 seconds it would serve people well to buy the DVD so they can stop it and see him for longer than that...For me the net is just this hotbed, and anything LOTR is hot to begin with. (documentary interview)



Fig.10. Front page of *USA Today* (5 August, 2002) featuring Bret McKenzie as Figwit in masthead promotion.

Insofar as this industry recognition of Figwit legitimated his creators online activities, they did not highlight the parody, and the reasons for not doing so were obvious to Iris as I have previously mentioned. Thus, the consequent media phenomena, documentary and thesis that were generated through the Figwit parody clearly illustrate the multifarious ways in which online interactivity may be dynamically interpreted, reproduced and reconfigured by the diverse and highly dynamic processes of online-offline fields.

Summary

I have focused on some of the new possibilities that have emerged through people's online activity and interactivity. Through my examination of the dynamic dialogic between online technological frameworks and the offline socio-cultural processes I found that online identities and communities may be highly idealised and intensified, while simultaneously enabled and constrained by offline hegemonies. Therefore the ideal identities and community constructed through online engagements, while embedded in individuals' existing socio-cultural worlds, are nevertheless not easily replicated in people's offline contexts.

In the offline-online dialogic of the Figwit's creators, I explained how the configuration of online technology facilitated and strategically intensified the women's ideal reflexive individuality and their intellectual middle class dispositions, as evident in their creation of the Figwit parody. I examined the ensuing online, media and public interest in the elf extra, and found that these interpretations of the Figwit parody were often divergent to the women's intended representations. Consequently, the Figwit creators' idealised online identities were not consistently realised across a diverse range of online and offline contexts.

In this chapter I began with an analysis of the material conditions of online technological frameworks. I explained how these configurations provoked dynamic reflexive authorship in users, where the inherent textuality through message boards, email and instant messaging enabled constant reediting and rewriting. I also focused on the direct and instantaneousness communication pathways of online interaction that created immediate opportunities for either affirmative or critical socialability. The widespread and networked configuration of online interactivity presented users with a potentially limitless pool of fellow online individuals. This was particularly evident in my ethnography where the Figwit creators readily generated a like-minded community based on individuals' reflexive, yet widely shared, interests. From

my analysis it was evident that online technological frameworks enabled intense, performative and rhetorical online interactivity through which various offline social and cultural processes were enacted, negotiated and enhanced.

In my analysis of the Figwit creators' offline socio-cultural processes it was clearly evident that the online technological architecture provoked and enhanced the experience of intensified ideal reflexive individuality. I also found that the online creation and consumption of the Figwit parody enabled his users to be creative and progressive in their self-assembled online personas in ways that were not possible through their offline social contexts. This clearly illustrated that the online community generated around the Figwit parody was a form of social validation for his creators that was founded on a mutual affirmation of their online and idealised reflexive identities.

I also explained how the intimate and collaborative qualities of different online technology fields differed significantly, for example the open accessibility of a website does not have the same dynamic conversationality and socialability of message boards. The technical configuration of the FigwitLives website facilitated responses that were divergent to the parody interpretation intended by his creators. Nevertheless, the TORn message boards characteristically promoted collaborative, dynamic and highly reflexive interactivity dynamically generated a shared understanding of the highly distinct elf parody. In contrast, the FigwitLives site was in essence a static text, and lacked the intimate fluidity of the online discussion boards. The structurally open configurations of the World Wide Web clearly enable the immediate dissemination of a wide range of affirmative, alternative and/or divergent interpretations of phenomena than is typically possible in offline contexts, although these routinely coincide with offline dispositions as is evident in my own navigation of the FigwitLives website. Indeed my analysis also illustrated that the potentially ideal online identities and engagements that the women derived from the creation and production of Figwit, did not necessarily replicate or translate into the offline realities as

Figwit moved away from the TORn message boards and evolved into a media phenomenon.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

The production and consumption of Figwit as an online parody of celebrity is an evident manifestation of the highly dynamic dialogic that may exist between offline and online ideals, aspirations, and hegemonies. The multi-sited ethnography of Figwit reveals that online interactivity is a dynamic hybrid of offline and online potentialities and imaginaries that include narratives of contemporary celebrity, users' identity performances, community formation/maintenance, individualised reflexivity and habitus generated social distinctions.

The formation of Figwit also illustrates that a group of transnationally separated individuals can readily activate online interactivity constructed around their reflexive, shared and often specific areas of interests. Thus Figwit, which began as a series of individualised fan practices eventually matured into a distinct online community.

The ethnography of Figwit reveals a tangible, yet dynamic, correlation between offline socio-cultural process and those of online interactivity. The evolution of the Figwit community essentially commenced in the TORn membership process that each of Figwit's creators undertook. This continued through their subsequent 'in-joke' demonstrating their use of typical community formation and maintenance strategies that individuals utilise in distinct common interest or *communitas* associations, regardless of whether they are on or offline.

Furthermore, the creators' shared intellectual middle-class imaginaries and dispositions, which were generated within their educational, family and vocational habitus, and which were expressed online via in their use of irony through to their technical website expertise, significantly impacted upon their internet activities and interactivity.

Figwit's production and consumption does, however, reveal some distinctive and dynamic traits of online sociability and associated reflexive identity assembly. Online interactivity routinely presents the opportunity for individuals to intentionally realise offline social interests and connections in intensified, hyper-distinctive and immediate ways. The individual creators of Figwit had independent and existing offline relationships with LOTR (novel and movie) and were motivated to go online after seeing the film adaptation. Once in the cyber-locale of TORn the women's participation was essentially directed toward the 'swooning, drooling' message boards generated by girly fans, and which predominately focused on the aesthetic qualities of the male characters. These messages typically reproduced conspicuously sexualised, feminine adulatory fan practices. Furthermore, this online compartmentalisation not only reflected online hyper-distinction practices, but was also patently informed by offline adulatory gazes and the prior technical proficiency of TORn users.

My examination of the connections between the online and offline also found that Figwit, as a parody of contemporary celebrity, presented a unique opportunity to investigate contemporary celebrity ideal practices, narratives and manifestations. My historical contextualisation of celebrity found that it often denoted high-status, socially elevated individuals, and that the composition of celebrity identity hegemonically supported historical and existent social structures and hierarchies.

Figwit, the fictional character aligned and was imbued with ideal celebrity characteristics, such as pouting, brooding handsomeness and enigmatic silence. As an online celebrity parody and example of present-day fan consumption, Figwit clearly exemplifies the highly reflexive individually-oriented manner of celebrity adulation and admiration practices.

In post-industrial society, I found that contemporary celebrities were constructed and interpreted as ideal models of reflexive individualism, an outcome of the structural conditions of post-industrialism that has resulted in

the institutionalisation of individualism (Beck 2002), in reflexive knowledge structures and systems (Giddens 1991; Lash 1994) and in the increased mobility of capital and labour (Gellner 1983).

Contemporary celebrities, such as actors, musicians, sports stars and others, are typically perceived to embody ideal reflexive dispositions. These include claiming to be, and being socially affirmed as, an autonomous individual who is unique in thought and action. Ideal reflexive dispositions also include individuals who actively embrace and orientation towards various socio-cultural narratives (e.g. scientific knowledge; religious beliefs etc), personal commitment to self-improvement and deliberate formation of rewarding social relationships. Ideal reflexive individuals should also be adaptable and creative in the face of constant change and should actively maintain valued appearance and body aesthetics (Howland 2007). In essence the ideal celebrity or reflexive individual seeks to create, perform and narrate the self as coherent and praiseworthy (Howland 2004).

Ideal reflexive individualism and its attendant dispositions compel people to generate and navigate increasingly individually-oriented, self-determined life pathways. In response, post-industrial individuals move towards reflexively-enriching realms of social connectedness and other areas that potentially generate the most successful outcomes, such as consumption practices (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000).

Furthermore, the highly dynamic and distinctive dialogic between online technological frameworks and the offline socio-cultural processes clearly revealed that online identities and communities may be highly idealised and intensified expression of individuals' existing socio-cultural worlds. This was in part due to the material architecture of online interactivity, which provoke dynamic authorship, direct and instantaneous communication pathways of online interaction and a potentially limitless pool of online conversations. This customarily enables intense, strategically performative and rhetorical online interactivity through which offline socio-cultural processes may be

symbolically enacted, negotiated and enhanced. In addition, hyper-distinctive associations were also cultivated by online digital architecture, especially the capacity for searchability, traceability, and rhetorical framing processes that facilitate continuous re-editing and authorship possibilities. This is new outcome which arises from online digital architecture and interactivity, and was recognised and valued by online users, who readily embrace the hyper-reflexive subjectivity and intersubjectivity of online interactivity.

I also found that the collaborative qualities of different online technological fields significantly differed. For example, the open accessibility of a website does not possess the same dynamic conversational and immediately collaborative qualities of message boards. Nevertheless the architecture of the World Wide Web dynamically enabled the immediate and widespread dissemination of a diversity of affirmative, alternative and/or divergent interpretations of phenomena than is typically possible in offline face-to-face social contexts.

Ideal and intensified technosociality is not easily replicated in people's offline contexts and may be reproduced in unanticipated ways. For example, the online practices of Figwit creators impacted on their offline worlds especially when the core Figwit members met one another in person and one married an individual that they met on the TORn website. Furthermore some of the offline and online interpretations of the Figwit parody clearly contradicted the authors' original online intent, in some cases reclassifying the creators as 'swooning, drooling' girls fans and Figwit as a creation of genuine female fan adulation.

However, insofar as online practices influence offline situations, my ethnography shows that online communities are difficult to sustain. In fact geographic distance, cost of travel; difference in age; educational and vocational backgrounds; life trajectories and other socially distinctive characteristics of the Figwit creators significantly impacted upon their

ongoing online and offline community associations. Although, as the materiality of online technological configurations clearly demonstrate that people's online interactivity can long outlast their active investment and involvement, as other individuals reproduce and reconfigure these online creations as their own.

The ethnography of Figwit plainly demonstrates that online interactivity is a complex and rich dialogic of offline socio-cultural processes and online material technology. Therefore online interactivity must be understood and studied as a phenomena that produces new possibilities for socio-cultural activity. In this respect, further research interests should consider how sociality and social connectedness is altered or strategically reconfigured through online interactivity. In other words, if technosocial engagements facilitate idealised and hyper-distinctive practices amongst its users, does this alter users' understandings and expectations of their existing offline social and identity narratives, ideals and practices? Furthermore, how do online users negotiate the built-in limitations of online digital architecture when their practices fall short of their social and reflexive ideals? Indeed, further study of online-offline realms will inform anthropological discourse of post-industrial identity and community formation.

Abbreviations

AE	ArwenElf (Sherry's screen name)
FL	Figwit Lives website
FOTC	Flight of the Conchords
FOTR	Fellowship of the Ring
LMAO	Laugh my ass off (online shorthand)
LOL	Laugh out loud (online shorthand)
LOTR	Lord of the Rings
OMG	Oh my god (online shorthand)
OTT	Over the top (online shorthand)
RL	Real life
ROTK	Return of the King
ROTLMFAO	Rolling on the floor laughing my ass off (online shorthand)
TORn	TheOneRing[dot]net

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